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MURDER IN THE COALHOLE

by
MILES BURTON



Published for

THE CRIME CLUB

by COLLINS FORTY-EIGHT PALL MALL
LONDON

■

A Crime Club Detective Story

WHEN Mr. Polesworth, the unpleasantly efficient school manager, was found dead in a gas-filled coalhole, Inspector Arnold was convinced that the explanation was a practical joke gone wrong. But the nimble mind of Desmond Merrion soon proves that this simple theory is not the correct one, and from the slenderest clues he relentlessly builds up a case that sends a very clever murderer to the gallows. Miles Burton is recognised as one of our most ingenious writers of detective stories, and in *Murder in the Coalhole* he gives us one of his best stories.

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CHAPTER I

MRS. DAY was thirty-five, slightly-built, energetic and phenomenally loquacious. She had been official cleaner of Middleden Elementary School just over two years and had given the managers every satisfaction in that capacity. So much so, that at their last meeting that august body had instructed Mr. Vernon Polesworth, the correspondent, to place on record their appreciation of Mrs. Day's services.

On this particular morning, that of Thursday, January 12th, she arrived at the school a minute or two before her usual hour, which was seven o'clock. It was, as she had agreed with her husband before she left home, a dirty old morning. There had been heavy squalls of wind and rain all night and these had given place to a fine, sleety drizzle. It was gloomy and very cold, and Mrs. Day rubbed her hands together energetically before opening her bag to take out her key.

She was standing as she did so outside the iron gate leading into the playground. There were two entrances to the school building. At one end of the block was a gabled porch with an outer door. On opening this door, the visitor found himself in a small hall off which opened two further doors. The first of these, facing him, led into the main classroom. The second, on the left, was the entrance of the teacher's house. The door leading into the classroom was used by the head teacher, Miss Bowring, and her assistant, Miss Henniker. Its only other use was to admit official visitors, such as the vicar or the correspondent.

The second entrance to the building was a door opening on to the playground. To reach this entrance from the road it was necessary to open the iron gate set in the railings surrounding the playground and then to cross a corner of this space. The door led to the children's cloakroom from which again doors opened to the two classrooms respectively, the main and the infants'.

Mrs. Day, having succeeded in restoring some sense of feeling to her numbed fingers, took a bunch of keys from her bag. She selected one of them and inserted it in the lock of the gate. But she tried to turn it as the key resisted her efforts. Like most people faced with a similar situation she made two or three attempts, then by way of experiment turned the key in the opposite direction. This time she met with no resistance, as the bolt of the lock shot home.

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Mrs. Day aloud. She stood

frowning at the lock while all the sinister possibilities careered through her mind. The gate had been unlocked all the time, then! Had she locked it the evening before when she had gone home? Of course she had. She remembered locking it perfectly well. Just as she was putting the key back in her bag Joe Masters had gone past on his bike and called out to her. Asked her if she was going to the whist drive. And then she had gone straight home and put the bag in the drawer of the dresser as she always did. No, she had locked the gate all right, there was no mistake about that.

It followed, then, that someone must have unlocked it after she had gone home. Two other people had keys opening the gate, Miss Bowring and Mr. Polesworth. But Miss Bowring would have no occasion to unlock the gate. If she had wanted to go into the school from her own quarters she would have used the door in the porch as she always did. And even supposing she had wanted to go out into the playground on such a night she would have gone through the main classroom, the cloakroom and out by the other door. And as for Mr. Polesworth, whatever business would he have had about the place after school hours?

Mrs. Day shook her head ominously. There was something not quite right about all this. It couldn't be surely that Mr. Polesworth was right after all and that somebody was pinching the coal? He had kicked up as much fuss about it as though he had had to pay for the dirty stuff himself, and he'd fallen out with Miss Bowring over it properly. Until this moment Mrs. Day had been convinced that his suspicions were unfounded. Now, she wasn't so sure. The lock was an old-fashioned affair which wouldn't be so difficult to open if somebody had a key something like the proper one. Or even a bit of bent wire for that matter.

Still shaking her head, Mrs. Day passed through the gateway, leaving the gate unlocked behind her, crossed the corner of the playground and reached the cloakroom door. She selected a second key from her bunch and tried the lock cautiously. This time there was nothing amiss. The door was locked just as she had left it the night before. She opened it and passed into the cloakroom.

Here it was quite dark, but Mrs. Day was prepared for this. She always carried a small electric torch in her bag these winter days. By the light of this she made her way into the main classroom and lighted one of the gas burners which hung from the ceiling in the middle of the room.

It was not until then that she noticed the condition of the floor. The floor of the main classroom was Mrs. Day's particular pride. Not very long before, it had been relaid with

wooden blocks which by dint of her repeated scrubbing had become as white as snow. Of course the children dirtied it in wet weather. You couldn't wonder at that although Miss Bowring always saw that they wiped their feet before they came in. But as soon as they'd gone home in the afternoon Mrs. Day scrubbed it all clean again. So that in the morning the floor always looked like a picture, though she said it herself.

But this morning the picture had been wantonly defaced. A set of muddy footprints ran the whole way round the room, from the cloakroom door to the fireplace on the farther side and back again. And it wasn't one of the children nor Miss Bowring nor Miss Henniker. The footprints were a lot too big for that. They were the prints of a pair of gum-boots and a man's at that.

Mrs. Day stared at the footprints with rising indignation. He might have wiped his feet on the mat whoever he was instead of giving her all this extra trouble. For now she'd have to go all over the floor again after she'd lighted the fires. She'd complain to Miss Bowring as soon as she saw her—yes, and to Mr. Polesworth, too. Meanwhile, she'd best get on with her job and fetch the ash-bucket from the coal-cellar.

Now there had recently been a spot of bother over this coal-cellar. It was not a cellar in the sense that it lay underground, but was a capacious out-house which could be reached only from the playground. It was roomy enough to hold three tons of coal as well as Mrs. Day's household implements. It had a small window which was always kept shut, and the door was secured with an enormous padlock.

Coal kept in such a place should surely be secure enough against theft? Short of climbing over the railing, which was pretty high and spiked at the top, the only way of getting into the playground was through the iron gate. Once past this the way was clear to the coal-cellar. But the padlock was comparatively new and of great strength. It certainly could not be wrenched or coaxed open. Yet Mr. Polesworth insisted that more coal went into the cellar than was ever burnt in the school fireplaces. And he had hinted in no uncertain terms that since the cellar had not been broken into, either Miss Bowring or Mrs. Day had been helping themselves.

Mrs. Day sniffed belligerently. If Mr. Polesworth said any more about it she'd give him a piece of her mind, correspondent or no correspondent. She walked across the room to fetch the key of the cellar, which was always kept hanging above the fireplace at the farther end. And then she saw that the nail on which the key was normally hung was vacant.

Three untoward happenings in as many minutes were more than Mrs. Day could be expected to bear.

"Drat it!" she exclaimed vehemently. "Someone's trying to have a game with me, that's what it is. Well, I'm not having it. Mr. Polesworth will be saying next that I stole the key. We'll see what Miss Bowring's got to say about all this."

The door leading from the main classroom into the hall was rarely or never locked. Mrs. Day went into the hall. To the door leading into the teacher's house was screwed a small brass ornamental knocker. With this she rapped imperiously. "Are you there, miss?" she called.

A voice from the inner recesses of the house answered her. "Is that you, Mrs. Day? What is it?"

"There's been somebody about the place in the night, miss," Mrs. Day shouted through the door. "And the key of the coal-cellar isn't hanging where it ought to be."

"Well, I haven't got it," came the reply in a tone of resignation. "All right, Mrs. Day, you get on with your work. I'll be down in a few minutes."

"But how can I get on with my work when I can't open the coal-cellar door?" Mrs. Day challenged. "As you know, miss, all my brushes and what not are in there. Oh yes, and there's a lot of dirty footmarks on the floor. And how am I to get them off without my scrubbing-brush?"

"I can't imagine, Mrs. Day," replied the voice patiently. "I'll be down in a minute or two and then we'll see what can be done."

Mrs. Day returned disconsolately to the classroom. Bereft of her domestic weapons she felt as helpless as an infantryman deprived of his rifle. She wandered over to the nearer of the two fireplaces which the room contained and began listlessly to rake the ashes out of the grate. They'd all have to be picked up again when she got her shovel. But she might just as well be doing something until Miss Bowring turned up.

She was still on her knees beside the fireplace when the head teacher came into the room. Miss Bowring was at first sight not a particularly attractive person. She was somewhere in the late forties, tall, bony-faced, and with stern lips and chin. It was not until you had been with her some time that you saw the beauty of her fine auburn hair and detected, not without surprise, the undoubted glint of humour in her eyes.

On this occasion she was wearing a pair of bedroom slippers and her approach was consequently noiseless.

"Well, what's it all about, Mrs. Day?" she asked.

Mrs. Day let the poker fall with a prodigious clatter into the fender.

"Lor', miss, you did give me a start," she exclaimed. "I didn't hear you coming, and after all that's happened this morning I don't rightly know whether I'm standing on my head or my heels."

"You appear to be kneeling on your knees," said Miss Bowring in a matter-of-fact tone. "And what actually has happened this morning?"

"Ah, that's more than I can say," said Mrs. Day darkly. "First of all I comes along and finds the playground gate unlocked. And then there's those footmarks which weren't there when I locked up last night, I'll swear. And you can see for yourself, miss, the key of the coal-cellar isn't hanging on the nail."

Miss Bowring glanced shrewdly round the room. "Have you been to the coal-cellar door?" she asked. "It's quite likely that the key's in the padlock you know."

Mrs. Day took that as a personal accusation. "Never all the time I've worked here have I done a thing like that!" she exclaimed. "I always hang the key on the nail last thing before I lock up and go home. And I know very well that's what I did yesterday evening. Someone's been in here and taken it, that's what it is. And I'd like to know what Mr. Polesworth will say about that."

At the mention of Mr. Polesworth's name, Miss Bowring's expression became sterner than ever.

"Never mind about Mr. Polesworth," she said shortly. "Let's see if we can't clear this up for ourselves. I'm going to see if the coal-cellar door's been unlocked or not."

"Not in those slippers, you're not, miss," Mrs. Day replied. "It's soaking wet underfoot and you'll catch your death of cold."

"I've got a pair of gum-boots in the cloakroom." With the swift, rather abrupt movement characteristic of her, Miss Bowring went into the cloakroom, kicked off her slippers and drew on a pair of gum-boots.

"Come along, Mrs. Day," she said impatiently.

Mrs. Day obeyed her, bringing with her the poker she had been using. Perhaps she hoped to meet the intruder who had sullied the purity of her floor.

In silence the two of them walked across the pavement until they reached the door of the coal-cellar.

"Well, there you are, you see," said Miss Bowring curtly.

Mrs. Day stared at the door, so taken aback as to be for once speechless. The padlock with which the door was secured was in its proper place. And protruding from it was an enormous and clumsy key, to which a billet of wood was attached by a piece of stout twisted wire.

There was no question about the key and its attachment. It was the very one which Mrs Day had known ever since she had worked at the school. And yet here it was in the padlock instead of hanging upon its proper nail above the fireplace.

'Well, however did it come there?' Mrs Day demanded feebly at last.

'I don't know,' replied Miss Bowring with some asperity. It was bitterly cold in the exposed playground and she had answered Mrs Day's summons before drinking her cup of tea. 'I didn't put it there. I promise you. Is the door locked or unlocked?'

Mrs Day approached the padlock with an air of profound misgiving. She tried the key.

'It's locked, miss,' she replied.

'Well, that's all right,' said Miss Bowring. 'Now that you've found the key, you'll be able to get on, won't you?' She turned away, intent upon regaining the shelter of the house and the longed-for cup of tea. But these comforts were to be denied her. She had not gone more than a few paces when she was arrested by a piercing scream from Mrs Day. She turned swiftly on her heel. 'Whatever's the matter now?' she demanded irritably.

Mrs Day had thrown the coal cellar door open wide. She had recovered from her momentary fright and was now brandishing the poker in an attitude of Ajax, defying the lightning.

'Oh, miss, there's a man in the cellar!' she exclaimed.

'Nonsense!' Miss Bowring replied crisply. She retraced her steps until she reached Mrs Day's side. Then she sniffed suspiciously.

'There's an escape of gas somewhere,' she continued. 'Can't you smell it?' Now what about this man of yours?

Mrs Day pointed with the poker held in her outstretched arm. 'There he is, miss,' she replied. 'You can see him for yourself.'

It took Miss Bowring a second or two to get her eyes accustomed to the gloom. And then she was bound to admit the accuracy of Mrs Day's observation. There certainly was a man in the coal cellar. He was sitting on the floor with his legs outspread and his back reclining gracefully against the heap of coals. His head was bent forward on his breast so that his face was invisible.

But from the moment she first saw him, Miss Bowring had no doubts. The man sitting in this undignified attitude in the coal cellar was none other than the school correspondent Mr Polesworth.

CHAPTER II

THE fact was so devastating that for a few seconds Miss Bowring stood motionless, trying to grasp it. Two facets of it dazzled her to the exclusion of the rest. What was Mr. Polesworth doing in the cellar, and how had he contrived to lock the padlock from inside?

It was Mrs. Day who recalled her to the need for action.

"It can't surely be Mr. Polesworth, miss?" said the cleaner. "And yet I believe it is for all that. The poor gentleman must be ill or something."

Miss Bowring shook her head impatiently and strode into the cellar. An instant's examination was all that was necessary. Mr. Polesworth was as dead as frozen mutton and quite as rigid.

Miss Bowring retreated hastily, for the atmosphere of gas inside the cellar was overpowering. She always prided herself upon her strict compliance with the rules laid down by higher authorities. But this was an emergency that no authority had foreseen. The booklet of instructions issued by the Claytonshire Education Committee contained no paragraph setting out what was to be done in such a case. And the world outside the limits of the booklet very often proved to her an uncharted sea.

It was Mrs. Day's common sense that came to her rescue. "I can smell the gas now, miss," she said. "It must be escaping somewhere. I'll run along and turn it off at the main."

"Yes, do," Miss Bowring replied. "You came on your bicycle as usual this morning, I suppose? Jump on to it, ride down to the shop and ring up Dr. Stowe. Ask him to come here as soon as he can manage it."

Mrs. Day departed to carry out these instructions, leaving Miss Bowring wondering what on earth was the proper thing to do. Her duty was to refer to the correspondent in the event of any unusual happening. But there was the correspondent, dead in that stolid attitude, and quite incapable of giving any ruling in the matter. She decided to consult Dr. Stowe. He was one of the managers on whom the responsibility ultimately lay.

She shivered and returned to the house. Perhaps that long-deferred cup of tea might make things easier. She entered the sitting-room, to find the assistant teacher, Miss Henniker, engaged with the teapot. She looked up from this occupation with inquiring eyes.

"What's up this morning, Carrie?" she asked

Miss Henniker was short, thick-set and with an expression not unlike that of a benevolent owl. She was several years younger than Miss Bowring and the two were fast friends so much so that she rented a room in the teacher's house which Miss Bowring in turn rented from the managers. Officially, of course, they addressed one another as Miss Bowring and Miss Henniker respectively. But in the privacy of the sitting-room which they shared they allowed themselves the use of Christian names.

Before replying to Miss Henniker, Miss Bowring picked up her cup and took a long and satisfying gulp.

"That's better!" she exclaimed. "What's up, you want to know. Quite enough to be getting on with. That old fool Polesworth is lying—or rather sitting—dead in the coal-cellar."

"Don't talk such nonsense," Miss Henniker exclaimed.

"It isn't nonsense, my dear," replied Miss Bowring, pouring herself out a second cup of tea. "You can go and look for yourself, if you like. But don't disturb him. I'm sure I've read somewhere that if one finds a body one shouldn't disturb it. And, oh, I say——"

"What?" asked Miss Henniker.

"Doesn't one send for the police when these things happen?"

"It would be more to the point to send for the undertaker, should think. Have you sent for any one, by the way, or are you just leaving things to chance?"

"Don't be absurd," Miss Bowring replied. "I've sent Mrs. Day down to the shop to telephone for Dr. Stowe."

"Oh, that's all right then. He'll know what to do. How did it happen?"

"Don't ask such silly questions. How am I to know how it happened? Mrs. Day found the key of the coal-cellar in the padlock instead of hanging on the nail where it ought to have been. When she opened the door she found Mr. Polesworth inside and the gas escaping somewhere. And that's all I know about it."

"Well, it's most inconsiderate of him," said Miss Henniker indignantly. "A thing like this will upset the routine of the school for days, as you know well enough. I wonder, now?"

"Well, what?" Miss Bowring asked impatiently.

"What was he doing in the coal-cellar?" replied Miss Henniker impressively. "I say, you don't think that it was Mr. Polesworth who's been stealing the coal all this time, do you?"

"I wouldn't put it past him," said Miss Bowring wearily. "Listen, there's a car coming up the road. It'll be Dr. Stowe, expect."

She hurried out and reached the gate just as the car pulled up. Dr Stowe, middle-aged but thoroughly alert and active, jumped out of it.

"Hullo, Miss Bowring!" he exclaimed. "What's all this Mrs Day tells me? Something happened to Polesworth? Where is he?"

"We found him in the coal-cellar and he's still there, doctor," she replied. "It's this way. I'll show you."

Dr Stowe entered the cellar while a group, consisting of the two teachers and Mrs Day, collected at a respectful distance from the door.

"He's dead right enough," said the doctor curtly, after a short interval. "Have the police been sent for?"

"Not yet, doctor," Miss Bowring replied. "We were waiting for you to tell us what to do."

What the doctor muttered under his breath sounded uncomplimentary. "Mrs Day can jump on her bicycle and fetch Green," he said aloud. "Tell him that I sent you and that it's urgent. I'll stay here till he comes. And I shan't want any help either."

The women accepted this hint as a dismissal and Dr Stowe was left alone with the body. He set to work to examine it as carefully as he could under the circumstances, being careful not to alter its position. Mr Polesworth had been a man of fifty-five and without actually being a dwarf was stunted, under-sized, and puny. The body was fully dressed, and was wearing, in addition, a heavy overcoat, gum-boots and a soft felt hat. Not only the clothing but the face and hands were black. One would not expect a body found in a coal-cellar to be spotlessly clean. But the amount of grime which this particular body had collected seemed excessive.

The smell of gas in the cellar was still sufficiently strong to be unpleasant. Dr Stowe came out and paced slowly up and down the playground outside. There was more in this than met the eye, but it was not his job to begin asking awkward questions. That was the function of the police, represented in the first place by Constable Green. Fortunately Green was young and pretty quick on the uptake. But Dr Stowe wondered whether the situation would not prove beyond the wits of a country policeman.

However, when Green rode up on his bicycle the doctor greeted him cordially enough.

"Oh, here you are," he said. "Something in your line, I'm afraid. Mrs Day has told you all she knows, I suppose?"

The constable glanced round apprehensively but he had outdistanced Mrs Day, who was not yet in sight.

"You know how she runs on, sir," he replied. "She told

me a lot about the gate being unlocked and there being foot-prints in the school. And then she said that she'd found Mr Polesworth in the cellar and that he was dead."

"Did she tell you that the door was fastened and the key was in the padlock?"

"Yes, she did, sir, and that's just what I can't understand."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "It's worth looking into, I fancy. I've had a look at the body but I've been careful not to disturb it. In my opinion Polesworth has been dead for seven or eight hours and the immediate cause of death was carbon monoxide poisoning. That's only my personal opinion at the moment, mind. The coroner is bound to order a post mortem, and then we may find out a little more. Now you'd better go in and have a look at him."

Green complied with the suggestion without any very great enthusiasm. He was careful to avoid touching the body and after staring at it in silence for the best part of a minute he came back to the doctor.

"I shall have to report this to headquarters, sir," he said.

"No doubt," Dr. Stowe replied dryly. "But we can't very well leave the body where it is all the morning. Have you got the position fixed in your mind?"

"I'd like to write it down," said Green cautiously. He produced his notebook and laboriously wrote down a description. "I think that'll do, sir," he said at last.

"Then if you're satisfied, there is no harm in moving the body. Mr Polesworth wasn't a heavy man, I don't suppose he weighed more than ten or eleven stone. We can easily carry him between us."

"There'll be no difficulty about that, sir," said Green. "But where are we going to take him to?"

"Over to his own place, of course," the doctor replied. "It's only just across the road. Steady, though. You'd better warn his housekeeper first. What's her name? Mrs Repton? Your job I think, Green."

"Very good, sir," said the policeman as he started off in the direction of Mr Polesworth's house. This, which was known as The Spinney, stood not a hundred yards from the school on the opposite side of the road. Green was absent some five or ten minutes.

"I've seen Mrs Repton, sir," he reported on his return. "She had just found out that Mr Polesworth wasn't in the house and she was in a terrible way about it. I told her that he'd met with an accident, but I didn't say he was dead. I thought perhaps you'd be able to break it to her better than I could, sir."

"Thanks," the doctor replied. "I suppose you think I'm

used to breaking the news of my patients' deaths to their friends and relations? Come along you lift him under the arms and I'll take his legs."

They were both powerful men and they carried their burden the short distance without any great difficulty. Mrs Repton, stout, middle-aged, and in a great flutter of excitement, met them at the door.

"Oh, doctor, is he very badly hurt?" she exclaimed.

"He's none too good," replied Dr Stowe gruffly. "We'll carry him up to his bedroom. Show us the way."

They deposited the body on the bed and Dr Stowe turned to the constable. "It's none of my business what steps you propose to take," he said. "I'm going to stop here for a bit and make a closer examination than I've been able to yet. Then if you like I'll inform the coroner."

"I'd be very grateful if you would sir," Green replied. "The best thing I can do is to get on to the telephone to the sergeant about this."

"Please yourself," said the doctor. "But if I were in your place I should take steps to see that nothing was interfered with. You don't want Mrs Day to wash those footmarks she told you about off the floor. What's more, you'll have the children flocking to school at nine o'clock and it's a quarter to eight now. But I don't want to dictate to you of course."

"Thank you, sir," Green replied. "I'll see Miss Bowring before I ring up the sergeant."

He went across to the school and entered the building by the cloakroom door. Mrs Day had not yet removed the muddy footprints which were still in evidence. Green stared at these, wondering exactly what he ought to do about them. Then, deciding that the responsibility had better be left to the sergeant, he walked through the classroom and rapped on the knocker of Miss Bowring's door.

The door was opened by the head teacher herself. "Oh, it's you, is it, Mr Green?" she said. "Come in. Miss Henniker and I are having a cup of tea and as Mrs Day is naturally a bit upset she's having one with us. What can we do for you?"

Green uncovered and entered the room. "It's about those footprints, miss," he replied. "I wouldn't like them scrubbed off until the sergeant's seen them."

"Then he'll have to be quick," Miss Bowring replied. "Perhaps you don't realise that the school opens at nine o'clock."

"That's just it, miss. I was going to ask you not to open the school after what's happened."

But Miss Bowring shook her head firmly.

"I can't close the school on my own responsibility," she replied. "The managers are the only people who have the power to do that and then only on certain occasions. I'm not at all sure that Mr. Polesworth's death comes within the definition. Wait a minute, I'll look it up."

She opened a drawer and produced a booklet headed "Claytonshire Education Committee. Regulations for the guidance of Managers, Correspondents and Teachers." She turned over the pages of this until she came to a paragraph which she read aloud.

"The managers have authority to close schools on special occasions of public interest or of importance to the school."

"There you are," she continued. "You can read it for yourself if you like. You see what it says. Is Mr. Polesworth's death a special occasion of public interest?"

"Well, miss, I don't really know," Green replied, looking slightly bewildered.

"Or of importance to the school," said Miss Bowring firmly. "The managers might find a loophole there, perhaps. Mr. Polesworth was our correspondent, you know, and that being so, his death is of some importance to the school, I suppose. I shall have to ask the vicar, he's the chairman of the body of managers."

Miss Henniker sighed. "I said this would upset the whole routine of the school," she said plaintively.

"I'm sorry about that, miss, but it isn't my fault," Green replied. "Perhaps you'd like me to see the vicar and explain?"

"I shall see him," said Miss Bowring with decision. "It is for him to decide whether the school shall be closed or not. I'll put on my hat and go down to the vicarage straightaway."

As she left the room Mrs. Day became suddenly voluble. "I knew that something had happened as soon as I saw the gate wasn't locked," she said. "And then when I saw those footprints and the key gone from the nail, I was sure of it. And it's me that always gets the blame if anything isn't right. I know Miss Bowring thinks that I left the key in the lock last night, but I didn't."

"You're quite sure you didn't, Mrs. Day?" Green asked in an attempt to check her flow of eloquence.

"Quite sure? Of course I'm quite sure. I haven't worked here for two years and hung up that blessed key on the same nail for nothing. Why, I remember doing it perfectly well. It was the last thing I did before I turned out the light and locked up for the night. And I didn't forget to lock the gate after me either, I'd have you know. You can ask Joe Masters,

for he came by on his bike just after I'd done it. So it's no good your accusing me of having anything to do with it."

"I shouldn't think of accusing you, Mrs. Day," said Green hastily. "Now perhaps you two ladies wouldn't mind seeing that nothing's touched while I go and telephone to the sergeant? I'll be back again in a jiffy."

CHAPTER III

GREEN's report to his immediate superior was so startling that the sergeant communicated at once with the headquarters of the Claytonshire Constabulary. The Chief Constable, on hearing of the circumstances, decided that this was a matter for Scotland Yard. The immediate result of this was that Inspector Arnold of the Criminal Investigation Department arrived at Middleden shortly before two o'clock that same afternoon.

He was met at the school by Green, who told his story in his best official style.

"You'd like to see the woman who found the body, I expect, sir," he concluded. "I told her to be along, and she's waiting now."

"I'm a stranger here, you know, and I want to get my bearings a bit," said Arnold. "To begin with, I want to know something about this Mr. Polesworth. Where did he live, for instance? Had he any family? Tell me what you know about him."

"He lived at The Spinney over yonder, sir," Green replied. "His wife has been dead for several years, I believe. He's got one son, I know that, for he comes to stay with his father sometimes. I've never heard that he had any other children, but Mrs. Repton might be able to tell you, sir."

"And who is Mrs. Repton?" Arnold asked.

"Mr. Polesworth's housekeeper, sir. She's been with him ever since he bought The Spinney. She and her daughter, Grace, live in the house."

"What sort of a woman is this Mrs. Repton?"

Green grinned rather sheepishly. "Well, sir, that's a little bit hard for me to say," he replied. "You see, her husband that's dead now was my mother's brother."

"So Mrs. Repton is your aunt by marriage? She had been with Mr. Polesworth a good many years, you say?"

"That's right, sir. She always seemed to hit it off with Mr. Polesworth which is more than most people did."

"He wasn't popular then?"

Green shook his head. "Folk didn't like him, sir," he

replied "He wasn't over civil in the way he spoke, and he was rather too fond of interfering in other people's business."

"Did anybody have any definite grievance against him?"

"That's hard to say, sir. I dare say he's upset pretty well every one in the parish at one time or another. He got his windows broken one evening last year and he dressed me down properly because I didn't charge anybody with it."

Arnold smiled. "How's that, Green?" he asked. "I take it that not much happens in a place like this that you wouldn't know something about."

"That's just it, sir. I knew pretty well who'd done it. It was some of the young chaps from the football club. But of course, when I questioned them they all swore blind that they knew nothing whatever about it. I couldn't get enough evidence to bring a charge against any one of them, but you know, sir, one does hear things if one keeps one's ears open."

"Don't I know it!" Arnold replied. "That's what we're for ever up against at the Yard. Knowing who did a job but unable to produce enough evidence to secure a conviction. Why did the football team break Mr. Polesworth's window?"

"He'd upset them the Saturday before, sir. The ground lies right alongside the Spinney, you can see the goal posts from here. Our boys were playing Little-church in the Claytonshue Junior League. And somehow the ball got kicked into Mr. Polesworth's garden."

"And he objected. I suppose?"

"He did that, sir. He said that it had fallen within a yard of his greenhouse and might have done a lot of damage. He grows those orchid things, you see, sir. They say they're worth a lot of money, although I can't see very much in them myself. Anyway, when one of the boys went round to ask for the ball Mr. Polesworth wouldn't let him have it. He said it would be a lesson to them to be more careful in future. And as there wasn't another ball handy the match had to be abandoned."

"So they broke his windows for him?" Well, I don't know that I altogether blame them. Had Mr. Polesworth any profession or business?"

"He retired when he came to live here, sir. Before that he was in business in London but what it was, I couldn't say. Mrs. Repton might be able to tell you that, sir."

"I'll have a chat with Mrs. Repton later on. Now I'd better interview Mrs. Day. She's waiting here, you say?"

"Yes, sir, the school's been closed for the day and I thought you'd like to talk to the witnesses on the spot."

"Quite right," said Arnold approvingly. "Show me the way."

MURDER IN THE COALHOLE

They went into the main classroom where Mrs. Day was awaiting them. At Arnold's invitation she gave a long rambling, but substantially true account of her morning's adventures.

"And that's all I know about it, as true as I'm standing here," she concluded.

"I've got a few questions I should like to ask you about all this," said Arnold. "Let's begin with the iron gate leading into the playground. Is it always kept locked at night?"

"It's always locked at night and in the holidays. I lock it when I go home after cleaning up at night, and unlock it again when I come to do the fires in the morning."

"You aren't here all day, I suppose?"

"I'm here the best part of it. I get here at seven o'clock to light the fires and do a bit of dusting round. Then when I've finished in the school I go into the teacher's house and tidy up for Miss Bowring. That takes me until eleven o'clock or maybe a bit longer. Then I go home and get my husband's dinner and I'm back here at half-past three when the children come out of school. I scrub the floors and do my sweeping then and it's nearer seven than six by the time I've finished."

"What time did you finish here last night?"

"I couldn't say exactly, for I didn't happen to look at the clock. But it was just on seven when I got back, and I'd gone straight home on my bicycle."

"And you're quite certain that you locked everything up behind you when you went?"

"I'm that positive that I'd stake my oath on it," Mrs. Day replied emphatically.

"Who else besides you has a key to the iron gate?"

"There are two other keys. Miss Bowring's got one, and Mr. Polesworth had the other."

"What about the door between the playground and the cloakroom?"

"It's just the same with that, sir. And with the outer door of the porch. I've got keys to both of those and so has Miss Bowring and Mr. Polesworth."

"But there was only one key to the coal-cellar padlock?"

"That's right, sir. It's got a lump of wood tied to it, so that it won't get lost. And it's always kept hanging on that nail over the fireplace yonder."

"And you're quite sure you hung it on the nail last night?"

"If I didn't, I'll swallow it with the block of wood and all," Mrs. Day replied. "It was him that left the footmarks on the floor that took the key. You may be sure of that. They lead from the cloakroom door right across to the fireplace and back, you can see that for yourself."

"Yes, I see that," said Arnold "All right, Mrs Day I don't think we need trouble you any longer for the present Now I'll get you to show me the coal-cellar, Green"

Green led the way into the playground and so to the out-house

The door still stood wide open and had been hooked back "There was a terrible smell of gas in there, sir," Green explained "So I thought it best to leave the door open and let it air a bit"

"Quite right," said Arnold "Have you found out where the gas was escaping from?"

"Well sir I found the tap of that gas bracket that's against the farther wall turned on I didn't touch it for I thought you might like to see it"

Arnold nodded and walked the length of the cellar to the fitting in question It was an ordinary gas bracket which had been fitted with an inverted mantel But the burner had been knocked off and lay on the floor, surrounded by the white powdery fragments of the broken mantel And the tap at the uttermost end of the bracket was fully turned on

"Have you spoken to any one about the burner being broken off?" Arnold asked

"I asked Mrs Day about it sir She says she knows nothing about it, but it was all right yesterday morning for she lit it while she was getting the coal The gas is turned off at the main now, sir"

"The school is lighted entirely by gas, I notice Haven't you got electricity here?"

"We've got it down the village, sir, but the wires don't come as far as this I believe that Mr Polesworth did get on to the company but nothing ever came of it"

"Very well Now show me exactly how the body was lying when you saw it"

Green, somewhat to the detriment of his uniform, demonstrated this He sat on the floor in the angle formed by the wall and the side of the heap of coal He then spread his legs apart in front of him and leant back against the heap of coal

"Just like that, sir," he said "And when I saw him, I couldn't hardly recognise him He was all smothered in coal dust, face and hands and all"

That particular detail struck Arnold as rather curious Mr Polesworth had been found sitting on the floor, and one would have expected to find his clothes and possibly his hands covered with coal dust But why his face? The coal was not of a particularly dusty nature and even on the floor there was no more than a fine layer of dust. A small point possibly, but well worth bearing in mind

"All right, Green, that'll do," said Arnold. "You said just now that Mr Polesworth was the correspondent of the school. What does that mean exactly?"

Green got up and dusted himself carefully. "I don't rightly know, sir," he replied. "Miss Bowring would know for sure. But I fancy he was sort of responsible for what went on. Anyhow, it was he who reported to me a week or so ago that he suspected the coal was being stolen from here."

"Oh, he reported that, did he? What did he say exactly?"

"He called out to me one day, sir, when I was riding past The Spinney on my bicycle. I got off and he told me that he had reason to believe that coal was being taken from the school cellar. I asked him what made him think that, and he said it was because the coal didn't last as long as it should."

"He had no other evidence than that?" Arnold asked.

"No, sir, but he seemed quite positive about it. He said that Mrs Day took in four scuttles of coal every morning. He had these weighed full and empty and found that they each held a quarter of a hundredweight. That means that at this time of year the school fires burn a hundredweight a day."

"I follow," said Arnold. "This Mr Polesworth seems to have been a bit of an amateur detective in his way. What next?"

"He told me, sir, that the last time the coal merchant delivered he brought three tons of coal. At the rate of a hundredweight a day, it ought to have lasted sixty days. But it hadn't. It had only lasted fifty-seven. And that meant that someone must have made off with three hundredweight."

"Did he tell you who he suspected of stealing the coal?"

"Well, not exactly, sir. But he did say that it was easier to steal from a cellar if you can get at the key than if you can't."

Arnold laughed. "That's true enough," he replied. "What do you think yourself about this coal stealing?"

"I think Mr. Polesworth was mistaken, sir. You can't say that every time Mrs Day filled a scuttle she put in exactly a quarter of a hundredweight. It's very likely the scuttles would hold a quarter of a hundredweight in big lumps. If you were to fill them full with small coal, the weight would be a lot more."

"I dare say you're quite right, Green," said Arnold. "All the same, Mr Polesworth must have believed that coal was in fact being stolen, or he would not have reported it to you. And now we'd better go across the road and have a look at him."

The front door of The Spinney was opened to them by a pleasant-looking, fresh-faced girl, who smiled faintly at Green.

"Who's that?" Arnold asked as they went upstairs.

"That's my cousin Grace, sir," Green replied. "Mrs Repton's

daughter, you know. She's lived here with her mother ever since she left school some years back. This is the room, sir."

He opened the door of a bedroom and they walked in. The body was lying on the bed covered with a sheet. Arnold drew this down exposing the head and shoulders of a wizened undersized man whom he judged to have been somewhere in the fifties. Green had not exaggerated about the coal dust, for the face was blackened all over with it. Arnold inspected the hands and found them in a similar condition.

Arnold replaced the sheet. "That's queer," he said. "He was fully dressed when you found him, you say?"

"Yes, sir. The clothes he was wearing are lying on the chair yonder. I saw to that when the doctor had finished."

Arnold walked across the room and examined the articles of clothing one by one. He found the usual underclothing which, though not brand new, was of good quality and in excellent repair. A brown tweed suit, coat, waistcoat and trousers, well-worn but still far from shabby. The lower part of the trouser legs was plentifully smeared with coal-dust. A heavy overcoat which had once been dark grey but was now black with the same substance. A pair of gum-boots which, judging from the unworn appearance of the soles, were nearly new. A thin layer of mud, now nearly dry, still adhered to them, mixed with the now familiar coal-dust. A pair of soft leather indoor slippers, quite clean. And finally, a well-worn soft felt hat, covered with coal-dust.

Having inspected all these articles carefully, Arnold turned again to Green. "Did you find anything in the pockets?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," the constable replied. "They're laid out on that handkerchief on the dressing-table."

The articles lying on the handkerchief were these: A brown leather wallet containing a few currency notes, and two or three visiting cards bearing Mr. Polesworth's name. A small quantity of loose change in silver and coppers. A folded copy of the Claytonshire Education Gazette for the current month. A torn scrap of notepaper apparently forming one corner of a letter. The letter had been typewritten and certain words and fragments of words were legible thus:

idence
scovery of
convenient
night at 11 o'clock.

The remaining articles were a powerful electric torch and a bunch of seven keys.

"Good enough," said Arnold. "But now we've got to try and find out who last saw Mr. Polesworth alive. We'd better talk to Mrs. Repton, I suppose."

They had no difficulty in finding the housekeeper, for she was hovering about the hall as they came downstairs. Green introduced the inspector and she led them into Mr. Polesworth's study.

This was a pleasant room, plainly but comfortably furnished, and in perfect order.

"Now, Mrs. Repton, I'd like to ask you a few questions," said Arnold. "To begin with, when did you last see Mr. Polesworth alive?"

"Just before ten last night when I brought him his Horlicks into this very room, sir," she replied. "He was sitting in the chair you're sitting in now, reading a paper of some kind, but I couldn't see exactly what it was. And after I'd put the Horlicks down, I asked him if there was anything else he wanted and he said 'No.' So I said 'Good-night,' and left him."

"What was he wearing then?"

"The brown suit that he'd been wearing all day. Mr. Polesworth never used to change for dinner when he was alone."

"Did you notice what he was wearing on his feet?"

"His indoor slippers. He never wore anything else in the house."

"Where did he keep his overcoat, hat and gum-boots?"

"In a cupboard in the hall. They were handy there for him any time he wanted to go out."

"You saw him last just before ten o'clock last night? What did you do after that?"

"I went to bed. Grace and I always go upstairs sharp at ten o'clock, especially in the winter time."

"Did you hear anything unusual after you'd gone upstairs?"

Mrs. Repton shook her head. "It was blowing that hard you couldn't hear much else," she replied. "I fancy I heard Mr. Polesworth go out just as I was getting into bed. But I wouldn't be positive about that."

"You heard Mr. Polesworth go out!" Arnold exclaimed.

"That was unusual at that time of night, surely?"

"Oh no, it wasn't. Mr. Polesworth always went out before he went to bed."

"What did he do that for?"

"To stoke up the furnace in his orchid house. He was terrible particular about those flowers. Wouldn't let any one else see to them except sometimes Master Dick when he was here. He went out nearly every night of his life, wet or fine, to see if the heat was all right and that sort of thing."

"You didn't hear him come back last night, I suppose?"

"No, that I didn't. I wasn't listening particularly. Sometimes he'd be out for half an hour, and sometimes perhaps for not more than five minutes. It all depended how he found things when he got into the greenhouse."

"What did he put on on those occasions?"

"It all depended what the weather was like. He always put on a hat for he was terribly afraid of catching a cold in his head. And like it was last night, he'd have put on his heavy overcoat and gum-boots."

"How did Mr. Polesworth spend his time yesterday?"

"I don't know that he did anything very special. He went across to the school in the morning about something or other. And in the afternoon, just before he had his tea, he walked down to the village to post some letters. The rest of the time he was either in the greenhouse or sitting in this room reading."

"Did he get any letters yesterday?"

"The postman brought two or three in the morning and I put them on his table. But I couldn't say who they were from."

"Did you happen to notice if any of the envelopes were typewritten?"

"I can't say that I did particularly. I'm not one to concern myself with matters that aren't my business."

"Did he have any visitors yesterday?"

"Well, he did and he didn't. That's to say that Mr. Wenlock called some time in the afternoon, but Mr. Polesworth wouldn't see him."

"Wouldn't he?" Arnold asked. "Why not?"

Mrs. Repton shrugged her shoulders. "There's been some difference of opinion between them I believe, though I couldn't say what it was about. Mr. Wenlock came here in his car, just about three o'clock it was, rang the bell and asked if Mr. Polesworth was at home. Grace answered the door and——"

"Hold on a minute, Mrs. Repton," said Arnold. "We'll let Grace tell her own story. You don't mind, do you?"

"It's all one to me," Mrs. Repton replied. She went out and returned with her daughter.

"That's the gentleman who wants to know about Mr. Wenlock," she said, nodding in Arnold's direction.

"Yes, tell me what happened when Mr. Wenlock called," said Arnold. "You opened the door to him yesterday afternoon, your mother tells me."

"Yes, sir. He asked if Mr. Polesworth was at home and I told him that I thought he was in the greenhouse but I'd go and see. So I went down the path and found Mr. Polesworth, and told him that Mr. Wenlock was asking for him. He seemed quite upset and said he wouldn't see him. I asked

him what I should say to Mr. Wenlock and he said that I was to tell him that his mind was made up and further discussion would be useless. Those were the very words he used, sir."

"And you repeated that message to Mr. Wenlock? How did he take it?"

"He didn't seem to mind very much, sir. He only laughed and said, 'Well, if he likes to make a fool of himself, I can't help it.' And then he drove away in his car."

"I see. Did you hear Mr. Polesworth leave the house last night?"

"No sir. I was at the whist drive and dance at the hall, and didn't get home till after twelve."

"Well, I hope you enjoyed yourself," said Arnold. "All right, I haven't got any more questions for the moment."

CHAPTER IV

WHEN the women had left the room Arnold turned to Green.

"There are plenty more things I want to know, but they can wait," he said. "There are one or two matters we've got to attend to while it's still daylight, and you can help me. Slip upstairs and fetch the gum-boots and that bunch of keys."

Green departed to return very shortly with the articles in question. Arnold looked at the gum-boots and then at Green's feet.

"What size shoes do you take?" he asked.

"Elevens, sir," Green replied. "These gum-boots wouldn't be very much use to me, I'm afraid."

"I might manage to squeeze into them," said Arnold thoughtfully. "That's what I can't understand. They look much too big for a man of Mr. Polesworth's size."

"Well, you see, sir, he had to have them on the big side. He used to wear his indoor slippers inside them. At least that's how they were when I took the gum-boots off him this morning. And they were a pretty loose fit even then."

"That accounts for it. I suppose. Now we'll go across to the school again. We shan't be popular with Mrs. Day, because we're going to mess up her floor again."

Arrived at the school Arnold took off his shoes and began experimenting with the gum-boots.

"They're an infernally tight fit, but I can just manage," he said. "Now then, let's see what we can make of them."

The rain of the previous night had left a shallow pool in the playground just outside the door. Arnold, with the gum-boots, stepped in this and then walked boldly th-

the cloakroom and across the classroom floor. As he did so the soles of the boots left gummy imprints on the floor.

With Green's help the inspector drew off the boots. Now let's have a look," he said. He picked up a piece of chalk which happened to be lying on the mantelpiece and with it drew a circle round the footprints he had just made.

Those are mine," he continued. Now then, Green, down on your hands and knees and look as carefully as you can. Are the two sets of prints alike or aren't they?

Both studied the marks on the floor for several minutes in silence. "They look to me exactly alike, sir," Green ventured at last.

"So they do to me. But tell me what reasons you have for saying so."

"Well, sir, they're the same size and shape as far as one can measure them. And they've both got the same criss-cross pattern on the sole. And in both sets the pattern is less distinct on the right sole than on the left. And that means, I suppose, sir, that the right sole is worn more than the other."

"Quite right," said Arnold approvingly. "You've studied the main points. Now what difference can you see between the two sets?"

Green studied the marks afresh before he replied. "There isn't a lot of difference, sir. In your footprints the sole is as distinct as the heel. In the others though the sole is quite plainly marked the heel isn't. In fact in most of the prints you can't see the heel at all. Oh, and another thing, sir. Your paces are much longer than the others."

"Good again," said Arnold. "The other fellow's heels hardly seemed to have touched the floor at all. But there's a fairly distinct right heel mark just inside the door here. Do you notice anything peculiar about it?"

"Yes, sir. There's a sort of three-cornered patch in the middle of it where the floor is quite clean. And it's the same with the right heel marks that you have just made, sir."

"Yes, that's pretty conclusive, I think," said Arnold. He picked up the right gum boot and turned it upside down. "There you are," he continued. "There's a roughly triangular depression in the rubber right in the middle of the heel. It almost looks as though it had been burnt, as if somebody wearing the gum boots had trodden on a live coal. It's extremely unlikely that two pairs of gum boots exist of the same size and with a defect in exactly the same place. And right about the length of the pace. It's exceptionally close comparison with mine, which suggests that the first footprint was made by a much smaller man."

"Mr. Polesworth was a very short man, sir," Green remarked.

"Yes, I know. Now there's another point which isn't quite so clear. The original set of footprints is a good deal blacker than the one I've just made. One reason for that may be that they've had time to dry, but I don't think that entirely accounts for it. Look round and see if you can find me a clean piece of paper."

Green very soon found on the teacher's desk a sheet of note-paper headed "Claytonshire Education Committee." Meanwhile Arnold had produced his pocket-knife and was carefully scraping up the grime of the original footprints. He collected as much of this as he could and spread it on the piece of note-paper. "What do you make of that, Green?" he asked.

"It looks to me very much like coal-dust, sir," Green replied. "And we've found that pretty well everywhere already."

"So we have," said Arnold, and screwed up the dust in the piece of paper and put it in his pocket. "But, don't you see? Well, never mind. We've finished with the footprints. Now let us try the keys on that bunch."

Of the seven keys on the bunch three were soon accounted for. These fitted respectively, the iron gate leading into the playground, the door between the playground and the cloak-room, and the outer door of the porch. Arnold nodded.

"That's very much what I expected," he said in a tone of satisfaction. "Mr. Polesworth could get on to the premises at any time. But he couldn't get into the coal-cellar without coming in here first, for the key of that door was kept hanging over the fireplace. So far so good. And now, I think, we'll interview Miss Bowring."

The head teacher opened the door to their knock and invited them into her sitting-room.

"I should like to ask you a few questions, Miss Bowring," said Arnold. "To begin with, how long have you known Mr. Polesworth?"

"Well, I've known him by sight ever since I came here six years ago," she replied. "That was natural, since he lived only just across the way. But I hardly knew him to speak to until he was appointed correspondent."

"When was that?"

"Only last year. Mr. Wenlock was the correspondent before that. I was very sorry when he resigned, because he and I always got on so splendidly."

"You got on better with Mr. Wenlock than you did with Mr. Polesworth?"

"Oh, ever so much better!" she exclaimed. "Mr. Wenlock was always so reasonable, though perhaps he wasn't quite as

businesslike as Mr. Polesworth. But I could always talk to him about things and be quite sure he'd understand."

"You found Mr. Polesworth a little difficult, perhaps? Arnold suggested.

"Oh, he was quite impossible. Always suspecting that things weren't quite right, and trying to catch people out. The first thing he did was to question my postage account when I gave it to him. He asked me how he was to know that I hadn't put down a lot of official letters that I'd never written, and used the stamps for my private correspondence. And then, quite recently, we had all this fuss about the coal."

"Yes, I've heard something about that," said Arnold. "But we'll come back to the subject later. First of all, I'd like to know exactly what a correspondent is. Can you tell me?"

"Oh yes," she replied brightly. "It's all laid down in the regulations." She produced the booklet and turned over the pages. "Here it is," she continued. "It's all in paragraph 11. 'The managers of every school must have a correspondent through whom any necessary communications with the Board of Education or the Education Committee should be made. The correspondent will also be responsible for keeping the Minutes of the managers, and for preparing such returns and other documents as from time to time may be required. He must sign entries of the reports made in the log-book and must give the required notice to the Board of Education and to the committee for the closing of the school for any purpose.'

"In fact the correspondent is like a secretary to the body of Managers," she said as she put down the booklet.

"Thank you, Miss Bowring," Arnold replied. "I think I've got it now. You and Mr. Polesworth had to keep in pretty close touch, I gather?"

"Mr. Polesworth found something to worry me about nearly every day. Yesterday, for instance, he came over in the middle of the morning about a broken window. You see, the Education Committee repairs any windows accidentally broken during school hours. All other breakages the managers have to pay for. The other day when the children were waiting outside for the school to open at nine o'clock one of them broke a window. I thought I could stretch a point and say it was broken just after nine instead of just before. And I sent Mr. Polesworth a requisition for him to sign.

"Unfortunately it appears that he was pottering about over the way and he actually saw the window broken. And it was just like him to look and see what time it was. So when I sent the requisition over to him he brought it back and accused me of trying to defraud the Education Committee. And, of

course, I was only trying to save the Managers expense, as he knew perfectly well. Mr. Wenlock wouldn't have made a stupid fuss like that."

"You must have missed Mr. Wenlock," Arnold remarked. "When did he retire?"

"Ah! Now you're asking rather a delicate question," she replied mysteriously. "Of course, I'm not supposed to know anything about it officially. But the truth is, that he couldn't see eye to eye with the vicar, who is Chairman of the body of Managers."

"I see. Now about this business of coal having been stolen. What was really the truth about it?"

"It was all nonsense. Just a ridiculous idea that Mr. Polesworth got into his head. He had made some sort of calculation of how long the coal ought to last, and when it ran out a few days earlier than it should have, he began to get suspicious. He as good as told me that I was using the school coal for my fire in here which, of course, I'm not entitled to do. I was so angry that I told him a few home truths and we almost had a stand-up fight about it. And then he said that if it wasn't me, it must be Miss Henniker or Mrs. Day because they were the only other people who could get at the key after dark."

"You're quite satisfied that neither of them was actually stealing coal?"

"Absolutely. Mrs. Day is as honest as you'll find anybody in the parish. And as for Miss Henniker, the idea's ridiculous. Teachers don't risk the loss of their jobs for a few pennyworth's of coal."

"I can quite understand that. Now let's come to yesterday evening. How did you spend it?"

"As I always do. As soon as the children had gone I went for a walk. When I got back I sat in front of the fire and read till supper-time. After that I set to work on my supplies & requisition. Most people seem to think that a teacher's job ends when the children leave school, but it doesn't by a very long way."

"So it appears," said Arnold. "Now, Miss Bowring, can you remember what you were doing between ten and eleven o'clock last night?"

"Sitting in here working," she replied after an instant's hesitation. "I had a lot of other clerical work to do besides the requisitions. Miss Henniker was out, and I thought it a good chance to get things done."

"You were alone in the house then?"

"Yes, Miss Henniker had gone to the whist drive and dance. It didn't appeal to me, for I can't play whist, and I'm the most ungraceful dancer you ever saw."

Where was this function held ?

Oh in the village hall next to the Red Lion Green can show you— he knows it well enough This particular jollification is held every year about this time It's in aid of the local football club and pretty nearly every one buys a ticket even if they don't go Except Mr Polesworth that is He and the members of the club are at loggerheads with one another

Arnold smiled So I've heard he replied What time did Miss Henniker get home ?

Oh soon after twelve We sat up for a few minutes while she told me all about it and then we went to bed

So that between ten and eleven you were working in here alone Did you hear any unusual noise ?

Miss Bowring shook her head You mean I suppose did I hear Mr Polesworth going to the coal cellar ? No I didn't Even if it had been a still night I doubt I should have heard anything As you probably noticed this room and the coal cellar are at opposite ends of the block As it happens the wind and the rain were making enough noise to drown anything else

Have you ever known Mr Polesworth to come across to the school at that time of night ?

Never though it would have been just like him to come prying round when there was nobody about But it's quite likely that he has been over without my knowing anything about it He's got his own set of keys

There wouldn't be so many people about the road so late in the evening I suppose ?

Certainly not last night There aren't many people about this way after dark at any time And nobody would have been out last night if they could have helped it Besides between ten and eleven nearly everybody in the village was at the whist drive and dance

Except you and Mr Polesworth ? Arnold remarked

She nodded Except me and Mr Polesworth But you needn't suppose that we seized the opportunity of having a quiet little tete a tete We weren't bold enough of one another for that But what I want to know is this have you finished your investigations yet Inspector ?

Arnold showed some astonishment at this unexpected question What do you mean exactly Miss Bowring ? he asked

It ought to be obvious enough surely she replied

The managers can't keep the school closed indefinitely you know The Education Committee will want to know all about it as it is And what ideas the children will have got into their heads by this time I can't imagine

"Oh, I see," said Arnold. "Well, as far as I am concerned there's no objection to the school being opened to-morrow."

"And Mrs. Day can scrub the floor of the classroom this evening? She's been worrying me all the afternoon about it."

"Yes, she can do that," Arnold replied. "She'll find a few fresh footprints there, I'm afraid, but she needn't worry about them. And we'll leave you in peace now, for the present at all events."

As they were leaving the school a car drew up and Dr. Stowe put his head out of the window.

"Good-afternoon, Green," he said. "I rather thought I should find you here. This, I suppose, is the inspector from Scotland Yard you told me about?"

"Yes, sir. Inspector Arnold," Green replied.

The doctor got out of the car and they shook hands.

"Very glad to make your acquaintance, Inspector," he said. "Bad business this about poor Polesworth. How did it happen, do you suppose?"

"That's just what I'm trying to find out, doctor," Arnold replied diplomatically.

"I can't understand it," said the doctor. And then dropping his voice, "I can speak confidentially to you, I expect?"

"I hope you will, doctor, I'm bound to rely on what evidence can get."

"Well, it looks to me very like a case of suicide. I made a pretty careful examination of the body after we got into the house and this is what I found. The immediate cause of death was carbon monoxide poisoning, as I thought at first. It's only what you'd expect in the case of a man shut up in a cellar with the gas escaping."

"You found no other injury of any kind?" Arnold asked.

"Yes, I did. I found a contusion at the back of the head. But the blow which caused this would not have been fatal, though it might have knocked him out temporarily."

"Did you form any opinion about the contusion?"

"I think it's very easy to understand how it was caused. You must remember that I saw the body in its original position. The head was lying back against the heap of coal and the contusion was on the exact point of contact. Further, the hair and scalp in the neighbourhood of the contusion were plentifully sprinkled with coal-dust."

Arnold nodded. "It looks as though the contusion had been caused by Mr. Polesworth falling back against the heap of coal?"

"Exactly. This is what I think must have happened. Mr. Polesworth was standing up in the cellar facing the door. He was overcome by the escaping gas and collapsed. In

doing so, his head struck the heap of coal. This in my opinion would account for the existing injury."

"I'm glad to know that, doctor. But why do you suggest suicide?"

"Because Polesworth must have smelt the gas and known the danger," he said. "As it happens he had a very keen sense of smell. He has complained more than once of the nuisance caused by the emptying of cesspits in the village. It is quite impossible that he should have been in the cellar for an instant without noticing the gas."

"But surely there might be another explanation? Mr Polesworth might have had a sudden attack of some kind, fallen on the coal and stunned himself. While still unconscious he was poisoned by the gas."

"Well, that's a charitable way of looking at it certainly," said the doctor doubtfully. "But I don't think Polesworth was the type of man to have sudden attacks of that kind. However, we may know a little more by the time the inquest opens. I have reported the fact to the coroner, and he has ordered a post-mortem to-morrow. We shall find out then whether your idea that Polesworth had a seizure is right. You don't want to ask me any more questions just now, I hope? I'm on my way to see a patient in the next village."

"I won't keep you now, doctor," Arnold replied. "But I'd very much like a chat with you after the post-mortem."

"By all means. Green will show you where I live. Good-bye for the present."

The doctor drove off, leaving Arnold and Green to cross the road and re-enter The Spinney. Mrs. Repton, on seeing them, suggested tea, an invitation which Arnold accepted eagerly.

"You must have some with us, Mrs. Repton," he said. "There are a lot of things I want to ask you."

The tray was brought into Mr. Polesworth's study, and Mrs. Repton presided at the teapot. "I can't think why Master Dick hasn't answered my telegram," she remarked, as she handed Arnold his cup.

"Mr. Polesworth's son? I was going to ask you about him. So you sent him a telegram?"

"Yes, it's the first thing I did when I'd got over the shock of what had happened. I went down to the post office and wrote it out there. 'Father dead. Come at once,' I wrote and signed it with my own name, Repton."

"Where did you address it to?" Arnold asked.

"Why, to the place where he works, of course. He's in an office in London. Perry and Hardwell is the name of the people. They're wholesale grocers in Spitalfields."

"Perhaps for some reason he wasn't at the office to-day. Do you know his home address?"

"No, I don't, for he hasn't got what you might call a home other than this. He lodges with some people of the name of Acott, but I can't say rightly where they live. Young Mr. Harry Acott works in the same office as Master Dick. I've seen him for he's been down here once or twice with Master Dick. They were both of them here over Christmas."

"Is that the last time that Dick Polesworth was here?"

"Yes, he doesn't come home a great lot. Finds things a bit dull in a place like this, I dare say. Besides, Mr. Polesworth didn't care much about having Master Dick about the house."

"He and his father got on well enough when they did meet, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Polesworth always seemed pleased to see Master Dick. But he didn't like it over-much when he brought Mr. Acott here with him. Mr. Acott likes to have his bit of fun and Mr. Polesworth didn't care for that sort of thing."

"What form did his bit of fun take?" Arnold asked.

"Oh, nothing there was any harm in. But he always used to bring one of those accordion things with him, and he'd be perpetually playing on it and singing. And naturally Mr. Polesworth didn't like that. As Mr. Acott was Master Dick's friend, Mr. Polesworth didn't say very much about it. But he wasn't sorry to see the back of him, I know that."

"Mr. Polesworth had no other children besides Dick, had he?"

"I believe there was another boy, but he died young. No Master Dick will come in for everything there is, I expect."

"It's a delicate question, I know, Mrs. Repton. But Mr. Polesworth was fairly well off, I suppose?"

Mrs. Repton shook her head. "Ah, now you're asking," she replied. "Mr. Polesworth talked to me about most things, but never a word did he say of his affairs. He paid as he went, I know that like everybody in the village. And he didn't spend over-much. He didn't smoke and only drank a little wine now and again. The house belongs to him, and so does everything in it. But what his income was, is more than I can say. I expect the only person who knows that is the bank manager in Buckley. That's the market town for these parts."

"Yes, I got out of the train there on my way down from London."

When they had finished their meal, Mrs. Repton got up and carried off the tray.

"Look here, Green, I shall have to stop here until the inquest at all events," said Arnold. "Where can I put up? There's an hotel of sorts in Buckley, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, sir, there are two or three," Green replied. "But if you don't want to go as far as that, I'm sure that Mrs Cadby at the Red Lion would take you in. You'd be comfortable enough there, sir, I'm sure though it mightn't be quite what you're accustomed to."

"Take it from me, Green, a policeman of my experience is accustomed to pretty well everything. Let's go along to the Red Lion now. You can introduce me and we'll see what Mrs Cadby says about it."

As it turned out, Mrs Cadby was only too pleased to accommodate so distinguished a guest. She had three rooms available—two bedrooms and a sitting-room. "And I've only got to put a match to the fire and you can make yourself comfortable as soon as it pleases you," she said.

But before he accepted the invitation to make himself comfortable Arnold, piloted by Green, set out to make a tour of inspection of the village. He called at the village shop which was also the post office and sent a telegram to his friend, Desmond Merrion. "Come and see me here if you have nothing better to do." He signed the form and added the address of the Red Lion.

CHAPTER V

ARNOLD spent the following morning making a series of inquiries locally. As he was on his way back to the Red Lion for lunch he saw a car standing outside that hostelry and recognised it at once. He quickened his pace and entered the bar. There, sure enough, was Merrion, with a pint pot half-full of beer in front of him. He was listening with polite interest to Mr Cadby, who, leaning with his elbows on the counter, was talking volubly.

Merrion looked up as Arnold came in and nodded in an off-hand way.

"Better draw another pint of beer for my friend, landlord," he said. And then, as Mr Cadby disappeared in the direction of the cellar, "Well, here I am. The landlord has been telling me all about it with embroideries of his own. It sounds rather intriguing. But perhaps you've solved the problem by this time?"

Arnold shook his head. "I haven't," he replied. "It's good of you to come along so quickly. You'll stop for a bit I hope?"

"Oh, your wire came just at the right moment," said Merrion. "My wife's away staying with some friends and

before as getting bored with being alone. Yes, I'm stopping here for a day or two. The landlord says he can put me up if you don't mind my sharing your sitting-room."

"You know well enough that nothing would please me better," Arnold replied. "Mrs. Cadby will give us some lunch up there in a few minutes. I'll tell you the whole story then."

They had not long to wait before Mrs. Cadby appeared and announced that lunch was ready. As they attacked their generous portions of roast lamb, potatoes and brussels prouts, Arnold described in detail the results of his investigations.

Merrion listened intently, putting in a word here and there. "Murder?" he asked when Arnold had finished his story.

"The doctor thinks it's a case of suicide," Arnold replied. "But I don't agree with him. One of the first things I learnt was that this chap Polesworth was by no means popular with his neighbours."

"So I gathered from what the landlord was telling me just now. But the ordinary countryman isn't in the habit of murdering people simply because he dislikes them."

"No, but he isn't above playing practical jokes on them," said Arnold significantly. "And I'm beginning to think that Polesworth's death was the result of a practical joke. Do you see what I mean?"

"I think I have a glimmering," Merrion replied. "But I'd like to hear your theory in detail."

"Well, here it is then. You've got to remember that Polesworth was of a very suspicious nature and had got it into his head that someone was stealing coal from the school. His suspicions were confirmed by the receipt of an anonymous letter, and on Wednesday night he decided to visit the outhouse where the school coal is kept."

"That of course, is the barest outline. We'll discuss the anonymous letter and why last Wednesday night was a particularly suitable occasion, later."

"The next point is that Polesworth grew orchids in a greenhouse. The greenhouse is at the end of the garden, about thirty yards from the front door of The Spinney. It has a heating apparatus consisting of the usual furnace and hot water pipes. The furnace door is not in the greenhouse itself, but in a small lean-to attached to it. It was Polesworth's invariable habit to visit the greenhouse every night before he went to bed, and regulate the furnace. The point I want to make is that there was nothing unusual in his putting on an overcoat and gum-boots and leaving the house round about ten or half-past."

"On Wednesday night, then, he left the house as usual."

He had in his pocket, among other things, a bunch ^{ut} ^{was} ^{the} ^{premises}. On this bunch were keys giving him admission to the ^{premises}. His actions after leaving the house can be traced exactly. He walked across the road and unlocked the playground gate, but having got inside he didn't lock the gate behind him. That's a very important point, for if he ^{had} ^{locked} the gate he'd have been alive now.

"I rather fancy that the next thing he did was to ^{go} ^{to} ^{the} ^{coal-cellar} door. Finding it locked, he went to ^{the} ^{door} leading from the playground into the children's cloakroom. He opened this door with one of his keys, walked across the classroom, and took the coal-cellar key from ^{the} ^{key} ^{ring} ^{on} ^{the} ^{door} ^{handle}. He came back with the cellar key to the cloakroom door, went out and locked it behind him. You will remember that Mrs. Day found this door locked and the iron gate ^{was} ^{locked}. And I found the marks of his gum-boots in the classroom. All clear so far?"

"Perfectly," Merrion replied. "You've made a rough sketch of the premises, I suppose?"

"Here it is," said Arnold, producing his notebook and laying it open in front of Merrion. The latter studied it for a minute or two and nodded.

"Yes, I follow," he said. "There's just one thing that occurs to me. Why didn't Polesworth enter the school by the door in the porch? He could have got into the classroom that way, taken the key, and let himself out again by the cloakroom door."

"That's easy to answer," Arnold replied. "I told you that he more than half suspected Miss Bowring of pinching the coal? Well, if he'd gone in that way, he would have had to pass the door of her house. She might have heard him and that was the very last thing he wanted to happen."

"Miss Bowring was alone in her house at that time, I think you said?"

"So she told me herself. But let's get back to Polesworth. We left him outside the cloakroom door with the coal-cellar key in his hand. He walked to the cellar door and unlocked it. Then he made his second mistake of the evening. He left the key in the padlock."

"He naturally would," Merrion remarked. "You told me it had a block of wood tied to it. He would hardly have taken it out and put it in his pocket."

"Well, he didn't, anyhow. He left it in the padlock. Then he went into the cellar, turned on the gas and lighted. But the cellar is only a shed and just about as draughty it can be. According to all accounts it was blowing ^{hard} ^{guns} that night. Polesworth can hardly have lighted the ^{gas}

before it was blown out again. And a second or two later someone, who had been watching him all along, shut the cellar door and turned the key in the padlock."

Merrion rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Do you know, that's rather a pretty theory in its way," he said. "A practical joke you said. The idea being to leave Polesworth shut up in the cellar all night? But who's the practical joker?"

"Oh, some bright lad of the village," Arnold replied. "He'd had his windows broken once already, you know."

"Had he, by jove! But what was Polesworth's idea in going to the cellar at that time of night?"

"He was up to a little private detective work of his own. He had some reason for expecting that someone would come along and pinch the coal, so he thought he would catch them in the act."

Merrion shook his head slowly. "No, that won't do," he said. "You'll have to think again, my friend. If you were going to lie in wait for someone would you begin by turning on the light to warn them that you were there?"

"It does sound wrong, I know that well enough. But the fact remains he did turn on the gas. The tap was fully on when he was found yesterday morning."

"There's no arguing against fact," said Merrion. "Go ahead. Polesworth finds himself locked in the coal-cellar. What does he do next?"

"He stumbled about in the dark, trying to find the gas-burner. While he is doing this he trips over a lump of coal. He falls down and cracks his head against the heap. The doctor says that the knock he got would have been quite sufficient to stun him. And of course, once he was down the escaping gas would very soon do for him."

Merrion pushed his chair back and lighted a cigarette. "I've eaten far too much lunch," he said with a sigh of repletion. "And as a result my imagination isn't functioning as rapidly as usual. But even so, it tells me that your precious theory is as full of holes as a tramp's overcoat."

"Thanks,"- Arnold replied dryly. "I was expecting something like that. Get on with it."

"All in good time. Just now you read me out from your note-book a list of the things you found in Polesworth's pocket. You might let me have a look at it, will you?"

Arnold turned over the pages of the note-book. "There you are," he said.

Merrion read through the list and grinned. "I thought so," he said. "You've got an item here, 'electric torch.' Was it in working order when you saw it?"

"Yes, it was working all right. And it was a pretty powerful one, too, not one of those cheap toys."

"Then why, if Polesworth had this perfectly good torch in his pocket, did he want to light the gas in the cellar?"

Arnold shrugged his shoulders. "He didn't want to run the battery out, I suppose. Anyway, as I keep on telling you, the gas tap was turned on. There's no doubt about that."

"I don't doubt your word for a moment. Polesworth turned on the gas and lighted it. And here, I think, is where I bowl you out and send all your stumps flying. What did he light it with? If this list of yours is correct, you didn't find a box of matches in his pocket."

"Hell!" exclaimed Arnold wrathfully. "I never thought of that." And then after a few minutes of frowning silence, his face cleared suddenly. "I've got it! He must have found a box of matches in the cellar. I never thought of looking."

"Well, it's not too late to look now. And if you find a box I'll withdraw my objection. But I've got another one ready to put in its place. You still believe that Polesworth lighted the gas in the cellar?"

Arnold sighed heavily. "How often have I got to tell you that the tap was found turned on?"

"I'm not questioning that. And the cellar was so draughty that after Polesworth had lighted the gas, the wind blew it out again?"

"It's quite a reasonable suggestion, as you'll understand when you've seen the cellar for yourself."

"I dare say it is. But don't you see? If there was enough draught in the cellar to blow out the gas, Polesworth would never have been poisoned. The fresh air flowing through the place would have diluted the gas far too effectively for that."

"It's all very well for you to talk," said Arnold stubbornly. "Polesworth was found dead in the locked cellar as a result of carbon monoxide poisoning."

"Then I don't believe that the cellar was draughty enough to blow the gas out. That's the weak point in your theory. You assume that because the tap was turned on Polesworth must have lighted the gas. I've already given you two excellent arguments against his having done anything of the sort. In the first place, no man lying in wait for an expected thief would have lighted the gas when he had a perfectly good torch in his pocket. And in the second place, if Polesworth had meant to light the gas he would surely have taken a box of matches with him."

"Well, if he didn't light the gas, what did he turn the tap

on for? Are you in favour of the doctor's idea of suicide?"

"Not necessarily. You talked about an anonymous letter just now. Let's hear what you've got to say about that."

Arnold produced the torn fragment of the letter and laid it on the table. "Green found that in Polesworth's waistcoat pocket," he said. "It's quite easy to deduce the gist of the letter. I can't fill in the exact words, of course, but they must have been something like this: 'If you want evidence leading to the discovery of the thief, make it convenient to be about tonight at eleven o'clock.'"

"Yes, that's reasonable enough," Merrion agreed. "But, as usual, I've got a whole lot of questions to ask. To begin with, what makes you think that this letter was necessarily anonymous?"

"Common sense," Arnold replied shortly. "I'm assuming that it was sent by the practical joker, and he's not likely to have signed his name to it. Again that fragment is obviously the bottom right-hand corner of the letter, where you'd expect to find the signature, and there isn't one."

"I'll accept your first reason but not the second," said Merrion. "Why shouldn't the letter have continued on the back of the sheet of paper for a line or two? If it did, there might have been a signature on one of the fragments which we haven't got. The fragment as it stands is anonymous to us, I'll admit. But the complete letter may not have been anonymous to Polesworth. In any case, he received the letter, presumably read it and then tore it up. Having done so, why did he put one fragment, and one fragment only, in his pocket?"

"Turn it over and you'll see," said Arnold laconically.

Merrion did so. On the back of the paper was a pencilled scrawl. Four straggling block letters followed by an equal number of figures. "BUCK 1742." "Rather suggests a telephone number, doesn't it?" Merrion observed.

"It does," Arnold replied meaningly. "The name of the local metropolis, as I dare say you know already, is Buckley. I've been making inquiries of the telephone people and they tell me that Buckley 1742 is the number of Mr. Wenlock's office."

"Now I think I can tell you why Polesworth put that bit of paper in his pocket. This was the sequence of events. Wenlock called on him on Wednesday afternoon, but he refused to see him. Afterwards, perhaps, he thought better of it and made up his mind to get in touch with Wenlock next morning. Wenlock, who lives here but is in business as an estate agent in Buckley, would be in his office then. Poles-

worth scribbled down his telephone number on the first scrap of paper that came to hand, and put it in his pocket to remind him."

"Perhaps," said Merrion a trifle doubtfully. "You've looked for the other fragments of the letter, I suppose?"

"Naturally, but I've had no luck. There isn't even a wastepaper basket in The Spinney. Mrs. Repton tells me that Polesworth never used one. He always threw any paper he didn't want on to the fire. And that's what he must have done with the rest of this letter."

"Keeping back one piece to scribble the telephone number on? Yes, I suppose it's not impossible. Now, why was last Wednesday evening particularly favourable from the practical joker's point of view?"

"Because there was a whist drive and dance at the village hall. This festivity began at half-past seven and ended at midnight. From what I can gather nearly everybody in the village attended it. It was very unlikely that there would be any one about near the school during the evening. The practical joker could be pretty certain of not being seen."

"I see. What form exactly was this practical joke to take?"

"This, I think. Polesworth was to be enticed into the cellar and then locked in. The perpetrator of the joke sent the letter anonymously or otherwise. If my reconstruction of it is right, Polesworth was invited to visit the coal-cellar about eleven o'clock. The joker hung about until he saw Polesworth cross the road. He followed him through the iron gate, which was left unlocked, and while Polesworth was in the school getting the key he hid himself somewhere close to the cellar. The boys' lavatories are close beside it and that would do as well as anywhere else. Then when he heard Polesworth go into the cellar he slipped out, slammed the door, fixed the padlock and locked it."

"You'd have thought that the first thing Polesworth would have done would be to kick up as much racket as he could."

"I dare say he did. But who could have heard him, especially on a rough night? The nearest person was Miss Bowring, who was in her house. But between her and the coal-cellar was the whole block of the school building. The next nearest person was Mrs. Repton at The Spinney. But she had gone to bed nearly an hour before and was probably asleep. In any case she's slightly hard of hearing. Because of the whist drive and dance nobody else was likely to be about. Polesworth's only chance of being heard was by someone going home after the festivities, which wouldn't be before

midnight. And there's very little doubt that by that time Polesworth was dead."

"Your theory is that he stumbled over the heap of coal, fell down and knocked himself out."

"There can't be the slightest doubt about that. I think I told you that his hands and face and clothes and everything were smothered in coal-dust. No man walking about the cellar in the ordinary way would get in that state. But if he had groped about in the dark trying to find the gas bracket, one could understand it."

"In the dark!" Merrion exclaimed swiftly. "Why?"

"Because the gas had blown out. Haven't I told you——?"

But Merrion interrupted him. "You've told me half a dozen times at least. But why should Polesworth have groped about in the dark when he had a torch?"

"That's more than I can tell you. It's quite true that he had a torch, but it's equally certain that he didn't use it. Green found it in his overcoat pocket."

"Well, it's all very puzzling," said Merrion.

"I shouldn't have suggested your coming all this way if it had been as clear as daylight," Arnold replied. "And there's another little puzzle which you don't seem to have spotted. I told you about those footprints across the floor of the classroom?"

"You did. What about them?"

"They were made by Polesworth, there's no doubt about that. And when he made them the soles of his gum-boots were covered with black dust. I scraped up as much as I could of the stuff and I've kept it as a curiosity. But where did the dust come from? The road and the playground are both surfaced with tarmac. What mud there is on either of them is a brownish grey, certainly not black. The marks I made with the same boots were ever so much lighter in colour than those made by Polesworth."

"Yes, but——" Merrion began, then hastily checked himself. "By jove, that's rather a neat point," he continued, after a thoughtful pause. "The soles of Polesworth's gum-boots couldn't have got black until he'd been in the coal-cellar. And he couldn't have got into the coal-cellar until he had fetched the key from the nail in the classroom. Is that it?"

"That's it exactly, and it's been puzzling me ever since the point occurred to me."

"You're quite sure that the stuff you scraped off the floor was coal-dust?" Merrion asked.

Arnold took the screw of paper from his pocket and opened it. "You can see for yourself," he replied.

"Looks like it, certainly," said Merrion as he examined

the little heap of powder. He picked up a pinch between his finger and thumb and rubbed it, then he took a folding magnifying glass from his pocket and examined the powder through it. "What sort of coal do they burn at the school?" he asked at last.

"Oh, just ordinary coal," Arnold replied. "You can see the heap for yourself if you like. You'll find that it is in fairly large lumps and not over dusty."

Merrion folded up his magnifying glass and put it away. "I don't pose as an expert in fuels," he said. "But, at home, I use three kinds for different purposes. Ordinary household coal, anthracite and coke. Being naturally observant I have noticed quite a lot about all three of them. And in my humble opinion, this isn't coal-dust at all, but coke dust."

Arnold shook his head. "I don't think it's likely," he said. "I've been over the school premises pretty thoroughly, and I saw no sign of coke anywhere."

Merrion smiled. "Very possibly not. But what about Polesworth's orchids?"

"Polesworth's orchids!" Arnold exclaimed. "What the devil are you talking about?"

"Why, just this. You told me that Polesworth went out every night to stoke up his greenhouse fire. Nearly every horticultural boiler is fired with coke. You described the greenhouse furnace, so I suppose you had a look at it. Didn't you find a heap of coke somewhere handy?"

"Well, yes, I did, now you mention it," Arnold replied.

"Then your difficulty vanishes. Polesworth carried out his usual routine before he went across to the school. He had been pottering about his furnace, and that explains why his boots left black marks on the classroom floor."

"Good for you," said Arnold. "That's one trouble out of the way."

"And perhaps it suggests the solution of another. I can't quite visualise your picture of Polesworth groping about in the dark in that coal-cellar. I suppose you're quite sure that the grime on his clothes is really coal-dust?"

"As he was found in the coal-cellar I naturally assumed that it was," Arnold replied. "However, you can investigate for yourself. It's time I got down to work again. Come along."

CHAPTER VI

"BETTER start with The Spinney," said Arnold as they left the Red Lion. "We can go on to the school after the children have gone home at half-past three."

"I'm in your hands," Merrion replied. "Who shall we find at The Spinney?"

"Mrs. Repton and her daughter."

"Any one else?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. Polesworth's son, Master Dick, as Mrs. Repton calls him, arrived this morning. Mrs. Repton sent him a wire yesterday morning, but he was away from his office all day and didn't get in until late last night. He caught the first train down here this morning."

"You've talked to him, I suppose?" Merrion asked.

"Oh, yes, I had a few words with him soon after he arrived. Decent enough young fellow but not overburdened with brains, I fancy. He told me he'd be twenty-four next month."

"And what's he got to say about his father's death?"

"Precious little. He talked about the poor old dad and what a dreadful thing it was to happen. But he didn't go into transports of grief about it, whatever they may be exactly."

"You mean that he's not altogether sorry about it?"

"Oh, I dare say he's sorry enough. But his business-like head very soon prevailed over his heart. It wasn't long before he told me that he knew that his father's will was deposited at the bank in Buckley and asked me what he'd better do about it."

Merrion smiled. "He seems a practical young man. What did you tell him?"

"I told him that he'd better go in and talk to the bank manager about it. I didn't particularly want him hanging around here. Besides, they're going to hold a post mortem this afternoon, and that's never a very pleasant thought for the relatives of the deceased. As far as I am concerned, Dick Polesworth's only use will be to give evidence of identity at the inquest to-morrow."

They reached The Spinney and Merrion looked about him inquiringly. "Cosy little spot," he said. "And that's the school—across the road, almost opposite. Do you mind if we begin with the orchid house?"

Arnold raised no objection, and they walked down a wide gravel path until they reached a fair-sized green-house. The

door of this was shut and locked with the key in the keyhole.

"We won't open it," said Merrion. "It would be a pity to let in the cold air to those orchids. Pretty fine collection from what I can see through the glass. But Polesworth's heirs will lose them if they don't keep a fire going at this time of year."

Against one end of the greenhouse was a wooden lean-to. It had no door, but was open at one end. Just inside the opening three steps led down to the bottom of a cement-lined pit. On the greenhouse side of this pit was the front of the heating furnace. The other side was stacked with broken coke.

Merrion nodded. "The usual arrangement," he said. "To stoke up the fire you've got to get down into that pit. And if you notice there's a pretty thick layer of coke-dust at the bottom. That accounts for the state of Polesworth's gum-boots, no doubt. Naturally he'd get coke-dust on the soles of his boots. But I don't see why he should get any on his clothes. There's plenty of room to move about down there without touching the coke. Hallo! What's that?"

He pointed to the farther corner of the pit. Here the dim light of the January afternoon hardly penetrated, and at first Arnold could distinguish nothing. Then he saw an object lying on the floor so similar in colour to the surrounding coke-dust that it was hardly distinguishable. He took his torch from his pocket and directed its rays into the corner.

"It looks to me like a spectacle case," he said.

"That's about what it is," Merrion replied. "Did Polesworth wear spectacles?"

"I never thought of asking. None were found in his pocket anyhow." He descended the steps, picked up the case and opened it. Inside it was a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles.

"Better show them to Mrs. Repton," Merrion suggested. "I don't think there's much more to see here. Shall we go up to the house?"

Mrs. Repton answered the door and showed them into Polesworth's sitting-room. Arnold showed her the case. "Have you ever seen that before, Mrs. Repton?" he asked.

"Why, it's Mr. Polesworth's surely," she replied. "I couldn't be sure of the case but I'd know the spectacles at once if I saw them. I've seen Mr. Polesworth wearing them hundreds of times."

As soon as Arnold opened the case, she recognised the spectacles at once. "Yes, that's them. Where did you find them? Mr. Polesworth always carried them about with him wherever he went."

"We picked them up by the greenhouse furnace," Arnold replied. "Did Mr. Polesworth always wear his spectacles?"

"Only when he was reading or writing. But he never left them about like lots of people do. As soon as he'd finished with them he'd fold them up and put the case in his pocket."

"When did you last see him wearing them, Mrs. Repton?"

"Why, the last time I saw him and said good-night to him. He was sitting in his chair reading and he had the spectacles on his nose then, I'm sure of that."

"Thanks, Mrs. Repton," said Arnold. "You needn't worry about us. We are just going upstairs for a few minutes."

They went up to Polesworth's bedroom and shut the door behind them. "There's the body if you want to see it," said Arnold, jerking his head towards the bed.

Merrion lifted the sheet and stared at the blackened face. Then he took out his pocket magnifying glass and examined it carefully all over.

"It's coal-dust all right this time," he said. "I can't see a trace of coke-dust anywhere. But still, I can't understand how he got his face covered with coal-dust. It's the same with his hands, too."

"You'll have to accept my explanation," Arnold replied. "He must have groped about the coal-cellar after the door was locked on him."

"I suppose he must," said Merrion reluctantly. "But still I can't see why when he had a torch in his pocket."

He replaced the sheet and stood for a moment in silent thought. "What about those spectacles?" he asked abruptly.

"They're conclusive evidence that he went to look to the greenhouse fire before he went across to the school," said Arnold. "It's easy enough to guess what happened. When he had finished reading he took off his glasses, put them in the case and shoved the case in his pocket. He always did that, as you heard Mrs. Repton tell us. They were still there when he left the house. In order to stoke that furnace he had to bend down quite low. And as he bent down the case fell out of his pocket."

"And in spite of the powerful torch he was using he didn't notice them?" Merrion suggested. "He must have been using his torch, for it would be pitch dark by that furnace at night. Well, I suppose it's quite possible. Now then, let's have a look at those clothes."

He spread the overcoat over a chair and examined the surface of it with his magnifying glass. He repeated the process with the remaining outer garments and then shook his head.

"Groping about in the cellar won't account for it," he said.

"Why not?" Arnold asked. "Can't you find any coal-dust?"

"Find any coal-dust!" Merrion exclaimed. "Why, I could scrape nearly a peck off these clothes. That's why I say that groping about in the cellar won't account for it. Short of rolling about on the floor, I can't imagine how he got himself into such a state."

"Well, there it is," said Arnold. "You're satisfied that it's coal-dust and not coke-dust?"

"Perfectly. It's easy enough to tell one from the other through a lens. But I'd get an expert in such matters to confirm my observations if I were you."

"It's hardly worth while. His report wouldn't tell us any more than we know already. Anything more you want to see in here? It's after half-past three and the school will be empty by now."

"I don't think so," Merrion replied. "Oh, hold on a minute—there's the hat. Better have a look at that while I'm at it, I suppose."

He examined the hat intently then whistled softly to himself. "I say, where was this hat found?" he asked.

"Why, on Polesworth's head, of course," Arnold replied. "Where else would you expect?"

"It didn't fall off as he collapsed, then?"

"Apparently not since, as I tell you, Green saw it on his head when he found the body. Why, what's the matter with it?"

"Nothing. It's quite a good hat, though by no means new. The outside of it is smothered in coal-dust, certainly, but I dare say that could be brushed off."

"You'd expect to find coal-dust on the hat since Polesworth's head was resting against the heap of coal."

"Exactly, my friend, but there's something else about it I shouldn't expect to find. The outside of the hat is smothered in coal-dust, as I tell you. But the underside of the brim and the leather band that fits round the head is equally smothered with *coke*-dust. Now what do you make of that?"

Arnold shrugged his shoulders. "I think you're trying to make mountains out of molehills," he replied. "We know already that Polesworth stoked up the greenhouse furnace before he went to the school. He was wearing his hat when he did so and got some coke-dust on it. That's all."

"Does that explain how the coke-dust got on to the part of the hat that fitted round his head?"

"Well, perhaps not. But if you must labour these wholly unimportant details, here's a suggestion. We suppose that his glasses fell out of his pocket when he bent down. It's quite likely that his hat fell off, too."

"It isn't quite likely—it's highly improbable," said Merrion. "If it didn't fall off when he collapsed in a heap on the coal-cellar floor, it didn't fall off when he merely bent down to stoke the furnace."

"Well, I'm not disposed to argue about it just now," said Arnold impatiently. "If you want to see the school premises by daylight you'd better come along."

They left the house and crossed the road to the school. The iron gate was open, showing that Mrs. Day had arrived for her evening's work. They found her scrubbing out the cloakroom and, at Arnold's request, she gave them the key of the coal-cellar.

Arnold opened the door of the coal-cellar and stood aside for Merrion to enter. "Go in and have a look round for yourself," he said.

"Lend me your torch then," Merrion replied. "It's pretty dark in here already."

He took the torch, switched it on and wandered round the cellar examining every nook and cranny. At his request Arnold shut the door while he completed this examination.

He came out at last. "Not so dusty in the literal sense, I mean," he remarked. "How many people have been in there since Polesworth's death?" he asked.

"Lots," Arnold replied laconically. "I don't think between us all we can have missed much."

"No, but you've completely blotted out any footprints there may have been."

"What footprints?" Arnold asked.

"Why, the footprints made by Polesworth as he groped about, to use your expression. But there is part of a footprint in the dust on the floor at the back of the cellar near the gas-burner that rather interests me. It may not be of the slightest importance, for I suppose that half the village has been trampling about in here since yesterday morning."

"Oh, give us credit for some little intelligence," Arnold exclaimed. "No unauthorised person has been in here since Polesworth's body was found."

Merrion looked slightly sceptical. "Well, I'll take your word for it," he said. "Who, to your knowledge, has been in here since yesterday morning?"

"I can tell you that. Mrs. Day and Miss Bowring, Green and Dr. Stowe, myself and now you. That's the lot."

"We can wash out the two women," said Merrion. "That leaves four men. I'm wearing a pair of shoes with plain leather soles. Let's have a look at yours. Yes, the same as I've always known you wear. Black shoes with crepe rubber soles. Green, I suppose, wears regulation boots, doesn't he?"

"Of course he does when he's on duty."

"Leaving Dr. Stowe. What sort of shoes was he wearing yesterday morning?"

"I haven't the remotest idea," said Arnold. "Why don't you tell me what you're driving at, instead of asking all these silly questions?"

"Because it might put ideas into your head, and that would probably be fatal. The trouble is that we can't possibly take a cast of this footprint. It's in loose dust that wouldn't stand any playing about with. Here, come and look at it yourself and try and photograph it on your memory."

As Arnold entered the cellar Merrion directed his torch on the floor.

"There you are," he said. "That's not a bad footprint in its way. Some clumsy idiot has trodden on the heel and obliterated it, of course. But the sole is perfectly distinct and, what's more, it's characteristic. You ought to know what sort of shoes make a mark like that."

Arnold studied the footprint of which, as Merrion said, the sole portion was perfectly distinct. Instead of being a mere outline the dust showed a regular pattern. A number of raised circles extending over the whole area of the print.

"That mark was made by someone wearing a pair of Uskide-soled shoes," he said.

"Exactly," said Merrion. "Now who wears Uskide-soled shoes? Of course, we can't tell whether that footprint was made before or after Polesworth's death. Let's have a word with Mrs. Day."

They locked the coal-cellar door and, carrying the key with them, went to find Mrs. Day. By this time she was busy scrubbing the main classroom floor and looked up apprehensively at their entrance.

"I hope you gentlemen have wiped your feet on the mat," she said.

"It's all right, Mrs. Day," Merrion replied. "We only came to give you back the key and we won't intrude any further. By the way, does any one ever go into the coal-cellar besides yourself?"

"Well, nobody's supposed to," she replied doubtfully. "To the best of my knowledge nobody else has been in there since the coalmen brought the last lot of coal some time before Christmas."

"You're quite sure of that?"

"Well, I'm sure enough of it. But Mr. Polesworth had an idea that someone used to go in there and pinch the coal. I never thought there was anything in it myself."

They gave Mrs. Day the key and walked out again into the playground.

"I'll tell you what it is, my friend," said Merrion. "There's a lot more in this than meets the eye. Hallo, whose car is that standing outside The Spinney?"

"Dr. Stowe's I expect. I told you that he and a colleague of his were coming over this afternoon to do a post mortem."

"Let's hang about here until they've finished, then. We can walk up and down the playground to keep ourselves warm. Where's Green, by the way?"

"He should be here any moment. I told him to come back here at four o'clock. That's him coming down the road now on his bicycle, unless I'm very much mistaken."

Arnold was not mistaken. Green rapidly approached the school, jumped off his bicycle and saluted.

"This is Mr. Merrion, a friend of mine," said the inspector.

Green saluted for a second time and looked at Merrion expectantly. The latter acknowledged the salute.

"I suppose you didn't go to the whist drive and dance on Wednesday evening, did you, Green?" he asked.

"No, sir, I didn't," Green replied. "I had a point to make with the policeman from the next village at eleven o'clock. But the missus went. She always likes to go to anything like that."

"Quite right. It does everybody good to go gay every now and then. So you had a point to make at eleven o'clock that evening, had you? What was the weather like when you made it?"

"Pretty rough, sir. It was blowing hard with heavy squalls of rain every now and then. And it kept on like that for the best part of the night."

"The sort of night when you wish you weren't a policeman, in fact. Is that Dr. Stowe's car standing in the road there?"

"Yes, sir, that's the doctor's car. He told me he'd have to come here this afternoon."

Merrion nodded and moved away while Arnold gave Green his instructions. He walked thoughtfully up and down the playground until the inspector rejoined him.

"Yes, as I hinted just now, we haven't nearly got to the bottom of this affair," he remarked.

"Of course we haven't," Arnold replied. "We've got to find the practical joker."

Merrion shook his head. "That theory of yours won't wash," he said. "No more will the doctor's theory of suicide, for that matter. You heard what Green told us about the weather on Wednesday night just now?"

"I did, and every one else has told me much the same thing. What about it?"

"Just this. The ground must have been soaking wet, mustn't it? Polesworth walked in his gum-boots from the greenhouse to the school. At first he must have left footprints in coke-dust, but the rain would very soon have washed those away, wouldn't it?"

"Of course it would. That's why I found no foot-prints in the open yesterday."

"Very well. Now we come to another point. How far do you suppose it is from the greenhouse to the iron gate in the playground?"

"Sixty-five yards," Arnold replied. "I paced it myself."

"Good. Now the average length of a man's pace is thirty inches. Polesworth being below the average height and not so young as he used to be probably had a length of pace of about twenty-seven inches."

"Oh, come off it!" Arnold exclaimed impatiently. "Are you trying to teach me my business? I told you about the footprints he left in the classroom. I measured the length of pace and found it was only twenty-five inches."

"Never mind," said Merrion soothingly. "Let's stick to twenty-seven for the present. It's easier for purposes of calculation. Twenty-seven inches is three quarters of a yard. Sixty-five divided by three-quarters is eight-six, near enough. Now do you see what I'm driving at?"

"No, I don't," said Arnold forcibly.

"Well then, I'll tell you. Walking from the greenhouse to the iron gate, Polesworth took some eight-six paces. In other words, he put each gum-boot on the ground forty-three times. The soles of his gum-boots were coated with coke-dust when he started, admittedly. But do you really believe that after forty-three contacts with the wet ground either of the boots would have retained much dust? And yet they left so much dust on the classroom floor that you were able to scrap it up."

Arnold thought this over for a minute. "Yes, you're quite right," he said. "It does sound impossible. How do you account for it?"

Merrion grinned. "If I tried to, you'd say that my imagination had run away with me," he replied. "Let's settle another thing first. What size are Polesworth's gum-boots?"

"Eights," Arnold replied shortly. "His indoor slippers and other footwear are sixes. But he had a habit of wearing his slippers inside his gum-boots, so naturally these had to be larger than if he'd worn them over his socks."

"I take eights myself," Merrion said. "I compared the Uskide footprint in the coal-cellar with one of my own, and the size seemed very much the same. I think we can assume that the Uskide shoes were also eights."

"What on earth has that got to do with it?" Arnold asked.

"Oh, nothing at all, I dare say. Merely suggests that the owner of the Uskide shoe could have got his foot into Polesworth's gum-boots. But, I say, there are the doctors coming out of The Spinney. Hadn't we better go over and have a word with them?"

CHAPTER VII

THEY walked across to the car, and mutual introductions followed. Dr. Stowe's colleague was Dr. Porter from Buckley, who had been asked by the coroner to assist with the post mortem.

He and Dr. Stowe appeared to have reached identical conclusions. "Oh, it's a case of monoxide poisoning right enough," he replied in answer to the inspector's question. "There's not the slightest doubt about that. That particular cause of death can be recognised without any difficulty. And the injuries to the back of the head wouldn't have been fatal in any case."

"Those injuries were sustained before death, I suppose, doctor?"

"Oh yes, both Stowe and I are quite satisfied of that."

"There's another thing, Inspector," said Dr. Stowe. "It has been suggested that Polesworth might have had a seizure of some kind, which would cause him to fall on the coal and injure his head. I have no doubt that the injuries were caused by his falling on the coal. Porter and I found dust and fragments of coal all over the contusion. But examination has shown us that Polesworth was perfectly healthy organically. We found nothing whatever to suggest the liability to seizure of any kind. However, you will hear the medical evidence in detail to-morrow at the inquest."

After some further conversation, the two doctors drove away. Merrion smiled as he watched the departing car.

"There's a conflict of opinion in this case," he said. "Those two fellows have made up their minds that it was suicide. You've got a theory that it was an accident—the fatal result of a practical joke. And I am practically convinced that all three of you are wrong."

"Trust you to disagree with every one else," Arnold replied. "Well, what's your theory? Let's have it."

Merrion shook his head. "Not here," he said. "Let's go back to the Red Lion and get Mrs. Cadby to give us a cup of tea. I find that tea is a wonderful stimulus for the imagination."

"Then for heaven's sake keep off it!" Arnold exclaimed. "Your imagination is wild enough without any stimulus. Still, I agree that a cup of tea wouldn't be at all a bad thing. Come along."

Mrs. Cadby's ideas for a suitable meal in the middle of the afternoon were generous. As soon as they reached their sitting-room they found the table laid with an enormous home-made cake, two pots of jam, and a huge pile of bread and butter. Mrs. Cadby appeared with the teapot, told them that she had a dried haddock keeping hot, and seemed bitterly disappointed when they assured her that they simply couldn't manage it.

Merrion refused to discuss the matter of Polesworth's death until he had finished his second cup of tea.

"Ah, that's better!" he said, as he lighted a cigarette. "Now, do you want to hear what I think?"

"It would certainly be entertaining, though possibly not instructive," Arnold replied.

"Oh, I don't pretend that I've solved your problem for you. Far from it. But I've got a theory based on quite a nice lot of truths. I'll just run over those truths for your benefit. Polesworth's hands and face were covered with coal-dust. According to the doctors the bruise on the back of his head was similarly covered. So was the outside of his hat.

"The inside of his hat, that is to say the band which fitted round his head, showed plentiful signs of coke-dust. The black marks on the classroom floor made by his gum-boots also consisted of coke-dust.

"We found his spectacle case on the floor of the furnace pit among the coke-dust there.

"The tap of the gas-burner in the coal-cellar was turned on, although an electric torch in working order, but no matches, were found in Polesworth's pocket.

"There is an unmistakable print of an Uskide shoe, size eight, in the dust in the coal-cellar."

Merrion paused and looked at the inspector inquiringly. "Can you link up that little lot," he asked.

"Why should I try when you're obviously so anxious to," Arnold replied as he filled his pipe. "Fire away, I'm anxious to hear what you make of it."

"All right, then, here goes. On Wednesday evening Polesworth left the house much about the usual time, and for the usual purpose. Not wishing to get his feet wet, he had put on his gum-boots over his indoor slippers. That's all perfectly natural. He did much the same thing every evening of his life. But what did he do next?"

"He stoked up the greenhouse fire," said Arnold, seeing that Merrion paused for a reply.

"Did he?" Merrion asked quietly. "Did you look at the state of the fire yesterday morning?"

"No I didn't, for I had plenty of other things to think about. We know that he went to the furnace, for we found his glasses there."

"They having fallen out of his pocket while he was stoking? But why did they fall out on that particular evening? Did that often happen? Probably not, or Polesworth would have tucked them away more securely. And don't forget the coke-dust on the inside band of the hat. That must have fallen off, too."

"It might have blown off in the high wind," Arnold suggested.

But Merrion shook his head. "If it was going to blow off it would have done so between the house and the greenhouse, not after Polesworth had got in the shelter of the furnace shed. However, undeterred by the coke-dust which it had collected, Polesworth put it back on his head without attempting to wipe it. Doesn't that strike you as a bit odd?"

"Oh, I don't know," Arnold replied. "It's too trivial a detail to worry about. Perhaps he didn't notice the dust, or perhaps he meant to wipe out the dust when he got back home."

"But he didn't go back home. Why didn't he?"

"Because he went to the school coal-cellar instead."

"Ah!" exclaimed Merrion softly. "Now we're getting down to it. He went, I'll admit that. But how did he go? How was it that his gum-boots retained sufficient coke-dust to leave tangible marks on the classroom floor?"

"I don't know," Arnold replied. "That's a bit of a riddle, I'll admit. But there must be some obvious answer to it."

"What is the answer? You can't imagine Polesworth taking off his gum-boots at the furnace, walking to the school in his indoor slippers, and putting on his boots again for the purpose of crossing the classroom floor. Besides, you tell me that his slippers were perfectly clean and dry. Nor can you suppose that he flew, or rode a horse or bicycle, or drove across in any sort of vehicle. In fact, as you say, there is one obvious answer to the riddle. He was carried."

"Carried!" Arnold exclaimed. "What on earth do you mean?"

"Carried in somebody's arms. There wouldn't be very much difficulty about that. Polesworth was exceptionally light for a man. You told me that Green and the doctor carried him into the house without any difficulty. Well, I maintain that any one of ordinary muscular development could have carried him from the greenhouse to the school. I'd undertake to do it myself, for instance."

"But why should any one have carried him? He was perfectly capable of walking."

"Not just then," Merriion replied slowly. "You see, he happened to be unconscious."

Arnold looked at his friend encouragingly. "All right, go ahead," he said. "Give your imagination a perfectly loose rein. I can stand it."

"Very well then, I will. This is my version of what happened on Wednesday evening. Polesworth went out in the ordinary way to attend to his greenhouse fire. He had his torch with him and he put this down somewhere so that the light would shine on what he was doing. He'd want both hands for the stoking job and he'd probably put the torch down in exactly the same place dozens of times before.

"Now you've got to remember that he went to the greenhouse at about the same time every night and that this fact must have been generally known locally. On Wednesday night, someone decided to take advantage of it. This somebody hid himself outside the house and waited. He followed Polesworth to the greenhouse, and when he was bending down over the furnace he biffed him one on the back of the head with something he had with him for the purpose. I'm not going to try to guess what the weapon was. A bar of iron wrapped up in a bit of sacking or something like that, probably.

"Now what was the effect of the blow? Polesworth was knocked out as his assailant intended. He pitched forward, his hat fell off and his glasses tumbled out of his pocket. Naturally the other chap saw the hat but he didn't notice the glasses. He propped Polesworth up, stuck his hat back on his head and took his keys from his pocket. Then he switched off the torch and put that in the pocket of Polesworth's overcoat. I don't doubt that he had another one with him for his own use. Finally, he picked up the unconscious man and carried him as far as the iron gate. He unlocked this gate with the key from Polesworth's pocket and carried his burden as far as the cloakroom door.

"Talking about that iron gate. Isn't it rather significant that it was found unlocked this morning? If Polesworth

had opened it himself, wouldn't he have locked it behind him? I'm pretty sure he would. But it was part of the other chap's plan that Polesworth's keys should be found in his pocket. If he had locked the gate he would not have been able to get out again."

Merrion paused to light another cigarette and then continued. "Our unknown friend dumped Polesworth either just outside or just inside the cloakroom door. Just inside, I should think. He then took off Polesworth's gum-boots and his own shoes. He put on Polesworth's boots and walked across the classroom to fetch the coal-cellar key. In doing so he was careful to take short steps, such as a man of Polesworth's height might be expected to make. Having got the key, he changed the footwear round again, putting the gum-boots on Polesworth's feet and his shoes on his own.

"He was careful, of course, to lock the cloakroom door. Then he carried Polesworth to the coal-cellar and arranged him artistically on the floor with his head resting against the heap of coal. Now, you've got to realise that his whole purpose was to make it appear that Polesworth had met with an accident in the cellar. He wanted to rub in the presence of the coal, and he did so liberally. He smeared the unconscious Polesworth with dust from the floor; face, hands, clothes and all. He was particularly careful to rub plenty of coal-dust on to the back of his head. After that, no one could doubt that the bruise had been caused by Polesworth's falling against the coal. All that remained now was for him to turn on the gas tap, and in doing so he left the mark of his own shoe in the dust on the floor."

"That's pure guesswork!" Arnold exclaimed. "How do you know that particular footprint was his?"

"By a process of elimination," Merrion replied. "Neither you nor I made it because we don't happen to be wearing Uskide-soled shoes. Green didn't make it because, as you pointed out yourself, he was wearing regulation boots. The doctor didn't make it because I was particularly careful to notice his feet just now. He must take size ten at least, and couldn't possibly squeeze into size eight. You heard what Mrs. Day told us. She didn't make the footprint, as her feet are too small. And coalmen as a rule don't wear Uskide-soled shoes."

"Yes, but what about Polesworth's belief that the coal was being stolen?" Arnold objected. "I'm not much impressed by his belief that the thief was someone who had access to the cellar. The lock on the iron gate is perfectly simple and so is the padlock. Either of them could be picked by anyone with the slightest ingenuity."

"Well, we'll allow the possibility of a thief, if you like," Merrion replied. "It doesn't affect my argument. Let's get back to Polesworth's assailant. He put the keys back in the pocket where he had found them, and when he satisfied himself that the gas was escaping nicely he left the cellar."

"Then he was faced with rather an awkward problem. If he left the cellar door unlocked Polesworth might have come to before the gas had taken effect, and so escaped from the trap. Or the door might blow open and let the gas out. On the other hand, if he left it locked it would show that someone else besides Polesworth had been about that evening. On the whole it was safer to lock it. Although it would prove the presence of someone else there would be no clue to the identity of that person. So, leaving Polesworth securely shut in, he cleared off with a light heart."

Arnold puffed thoughtfully at his pipe in silence. "Confound you!" he exclaimed at last. "I knew you'd contrive some marvellous theory, but I didn't quite expect that. According to you Polesworth was deliberately murdered?"

"Deliberately. And if you're honest enough to admit it, ingeniously. If he had been killed outright by the furnace and left there, the murder would have been all too obvious. As it is the doctor thinks it's suicide and you think it's an accident."

"Well, you'd better finish the job while you're at it," Arnold growled. "Who is the murderer?"

"The man with the Uskide shoes, of course," Merrion replied. "Who he may have been I can't be expected to know off-hand. But somebody local, no doubt. Who else could have had the necessary knowledge? That Polesworth went out every evening to stoke the greenhouse fire. That he had the keys of the school on his bunch. That the key of the coal-cellar hung on a nail in the main classroom. And finally, that there was a whist drive and dance here on Wednesday evening. In any case, if I'm wrong and you're right, your practical joker must have been one of the lads of the village."

"I can understand any of the locals playing a practical joke on Polesworth," Arnold said. "But murder's quite a different thing. What was the motive?"

"Revenge would suggest itself to me. Polesworth seemed to have the gift of making himself pretty unpopular since he's been here. And we don't know what dirty tricks he may have played elsewhere. And in any case, there's the obvious line of inquiry: Who benefits by his death?"

"That son of his, I imagine," Arnold replied. "We can find out easily enough. But I say, there's one thing your precious theory doesn't account for."

"What's that?" Merrion asked.

"The anonymous letter. That rather bowls you out, doesn't it? According to my theory, its purpose was obvious, to entice Polesworth to the cellar. But from your theory it doesn't make sense."

"I don't know," Merrion replied thoughtfully. "There's one rather queer thing about that scrap of paper. I didn't notice a telephone at The Spinney."

"There isn't one," Arnold replied. "The nearest is the public telephone booth outside the shop."

"Then if Polesworth wanted to telephone to Wenlock he would presumably have done so from there. Why did he make a note of Wenlock's number on the piece of paper?"

"So that he had it handy when he rang him up, of course."

"Then it wasn't familiar to him. He hadn't memorised it, I mean."

"He wouldn't have written it down if he could remember it without," Arnold replied. "What on earth are you getting at?"

"You'll see in a minute. There's a local telephone directory in the booth, I suppose?"

"Of course there is. That's probably where Polesworth got Wenlock's number from. We know that he went down to the village on Wednesday afternoon."

Merrion smiled. "That's the point, only you don't see it," he said. "Why should Polesworth have looked up the number in advance? If he wanted to telephone, he'd have had to go to the booth in any case, and he could have looked up the number then. And besides, there's another rather curious detail. Have another look at that number scribbled on the piece of paper, and tell me if you see anything remarkable about it."

Arnold took the scrap from his notebook and looked at it attentively. "It's written in pencil, that's all," he replied.

"Yes, it was scribbled with a pencil, and rather an unusual pencil, too. Most people use a hard pencil which makes a greyish mark and an impression on the paper. This particular pencil makes an almost black mark, and doesn't impress the paper at all. Which means that it was very soft and had a blunt point. No pencil was found in Polesworth's pocket, and when we were in his room just now I didn't see one there either."

"Are you trying to suggest that Polesworth didn't scribble that number?" Arnold asked.

"I'm pretty sure he didn't. And if he didn't, who did? Somebody who knew Wenlock's number, obviously."

"Wenlock himself perhaps," Arnold suggested sarcastically.

"Possibly. Who is this man Wenlock? You've made inquiries about him, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, I've made inquiries about him. Directly from Green, and discreetly from our worthy host. Wenlock's a man of fifty or thereabouts, very comfortably off. He owns one of the biggest houses in the village, where he lives with his wife and family. He's in business in Buckley and is an auctioneer and estate agent. Beltring and Wenlock is the name of the firm, but there's no Beltring, and it's a one-man show. Until recently Wenlock was the correspondent of the school, if you know what that means."

"Oh yes, I know right enough. I happen to be one of the managers of my own village school. Why did Wenlock give up being correspondent?"

"Some trouble between him and the vicar, who's the chairman, I gather. There was a difference of opinion and Wenlock resigned. Polesworth took his place. And from what I gather, the vicar has jumped from the frying pan into the fire. There's been friction of sorts ever since Polesworth's appointment."

"Was Wenlock a manager as well as being the correspondent?"

"He's still a manager. It seems that he was appointed by the Claytonshire Education Committee. I don't understand why, but perhaps you do."

"I think I can explain. In the case of a voluntary school, there are usually six managers. Four of these are appointed under the Trust deed of the school, one is appointed by the County Education Committee and one by the Parish Council. And I've known in cases where the last two, being appointed independently, don't get on with the first four. By jove, that would be a refreshingly novel motive for murder!"

"What the devil are you talking about?" Arnold demanded irritably.

"Why the managers, or one of them, of a voluntary school, murdering their correspondent because he made a nuisance of himself. Seriously, though, was there any definite quarrel between Wenlock and Polesworth?"

"Well, I told you about Wenlock's visit to The Spinney on Wednesday afternoon. They don't appear to have been the best of friends."

"If I were you I'd look into that. Whether you agree with me or not, I'm perfectly certain that Polesworth was deliberately murdered."

"I'm not going all the way with you just yet. It's enough for me that someone must have shut Polesworth into the coal-cellar. It's my job to find out who that was."

"Very well, we'll leave it at that. How do you propose to find out?"

"Well, as you pointed out yourself, it must have been someone with pretty extensive local knowledge. And that's where the whist drive and dance is going to be helpful. I've told Green to go and see all the members of the local football club. Between them, they'll know who bought tickets and who attended the show. Any one who was at the dance has a perfectly good alibi. And we can call upon the rest to give an account of their movements on Wednesday evening. You couldn't count on that in a town, of course, but it will work out all right in a small village like this."

"Yes," replied Merrion doubtfully. "What about going back to The Spinney? We shan't solve this problem by sitting here and talking about it."

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN they reached The Spinney they found Mrs. Repton in a considerable fluster. "Master Dick has come back from Buckley," she reported. "He's brought his friend, Mr. Acott, with him. They're going to stop here over the funeral. And me being single-handed."

She pulled herself up abruptly, but not before Arnold had caught the last words.

"Single-handed, Mrs. Repton?" he asked. "You've got your daughter here to help you, haven't you?"

"She's gone to her aunt's in Buckley," Mrs. Repton replied curtly. "Master Dick and his friend are in the sitting-room. Shall I show you in there?"

Arnold nodded and she opened the door. Two young men were sitting there smoking cigarettes, and, in the absence of an ash-tray, scattering the ash on the carpet. Dick Polesworth was tall and lanky with oiled hair and rather an effeminate expression. His friend was a few years older, much the same height but of more robust build. Both looked up at the entrance of Arnold and Merrion. Dick Polesworth rose languidly to his feet.

"Oh, good-afternoon, Inspector," he said. "I thought you might blow along. Do you want to see me?"

"Yes, I'd like a few words with you, Mr. Polesworth," Arnold replied, glancing at his companion. Dick saw the glance and interpreted it correctly.

"Oh, you needn't worry about Harry," he said, "Mr.

Harry Acott—Inspector Arnold from Scotland Yard. I didn't catch your friend's name, Inspector."

Merrion replied to this for himself. "My name's Desmond Merrion. And you needn't worry about me either."

"Quite a family party," said Acott in a drawling, not unpleasant voice. "Sure I shan't be in the way, Dick?"

"You stay where you are. The Inspector can't ask me anything that you don't know already. Suppose we all sit down and chat comfortably."

Arnold and Merrion accepted this invitation, and the former spoke. "Naturally, I should be interested to know what you heard from the bank manager this morning, Mr. Polesworth."

"Well, that's soon told. I told him what had happened, and, of course, he said how sorry he was and all that. Then he went on to say that I, as the nearest relative, was entitled to see the will. He sent for it and we read it together. The gist of it was that everything was left to me, and the bank manager and I were sole executors."

"May I be allowed to congratulate you, Mr. Polesworth. Have you any idea of the value of the estate?"

Dick Polesworth and his friend exchanged glances.

"The bank manager said that it would work out somewhere about £50,000," the former replied. "I've already decided——"

But Acott interrupted him. "Don't count your chickens before they're hatched, Dick. It will be some little time before the will's proved and you can't handle the money till then. Sorry, Inspector, I didn't mean to butt in."

But Arnold disliked unfinished sentences. "What have you decided, Mr. Polesworth?" he asked.

"Oh nothing definite, of course," Polesworth replied hastily. "But when a fellow comes in for £50,000, he isn't likely to spend the rest of his life in a job at a few pounds a week. And Harry agrees with me, don't you, Harry?"

"My dear fellow, it's no business of mine what you do with your money. And I don't suppose it's of any great interest to the Inspector, either."

This was true enough and Arnold changed the subject. "When did you last see your father alive?" he asked.

"On the Wednesday after Christmas," Dick replied promptly. "Harry and I had been staying here and we left that morning. I haven't been down here since then. And the news of his death didn't reach me until late on Thursday evening."

"Mrs. Repton told me that she had sent a telegram to your office in the morning," Arnold remarked.

"Yes, I know she did. But I wasn't in the office that day.

My firm had sent me away on an outside job, like they often do. The chaps in the office sent the telegram to Harry's place. I lodge with his people, you know. And I didn't get it until Thursday evening—too late to catch a train down here."

"Where were you on Wednesday evening, Mr. Polesworth?" Arnold asked.

Dick looked helplessly at his friend. "That's just what we were talking about when you came in," he said. "We had a pretty thick night, and I don't remember anything about it until I woke up next morning and found myself lying on a strange bed."

"You were pretty bad," Acott agreed. "Do you want to hear the whole disgraceful story, Inspector?"

"It sounds as though it might be interesting," Arnold replied. "I'd like to hear how much Mr. Polesworth remembers of it."

"Oh, I remember the start of it well enough," said Dick.

"You know Harry and I work at the same place, Perry and Hardwell's. They are wholesale grocers and we work at the head office in Spitalfields. But it sometimes happens that the boss sends us away for a day to one of the branches in the country or somewhere like that.

"Well, as it happens, there's been some trouble between the firm and the shippers over the last few consignments of Danish butter. We couldn't get any sense out of them over the telephone, so the boss told us that we'd better go and see the consignments arriving at the port and find out what was the matter. That was on Wednesday. There were boats coming in on the early tide on Thursday morning, one at Hull and one at Harwich. Harry was to meet the one coming in to Hull and I was to meet the other at Harwich.

"The idea was that Harry was to go to Hull overnight, as he couldn't catch the tide if he waited till the morning. There was no sense in my starting before Thursday morning, for I could catch a train at Liverpool Street which would get me to Harwich in plenty of time.

"We both left the office fairly early and went home—to Harry's place, I mean. Harry put a few things in a suitcase and then we went back to the West End for a snack. After that we had a few drinks, and, well—that's all I remember, until I woke up next morning in some beastly low hotel near King's Cross. It was seven o'clock then and I'd missed the train I'd meant to catch. However, I got the next one and the boat being, fortunately, a bit late, was at Harwich just in time to meet her."

Acott laughed. "I'm sorry about the low hotel," he said. "But where else was I to park you? You were beastly drunk

and no respectable place would have taken you in. And I couldn't trust you to take yourself home. You wanted to play shove ha'penny with a policeman on the pavement, you remember."

"I don't remember," said Dick. "I only know that I felt like nothing on earth when I woke up in the morning. The Inspector wants to know what happened to me after we had that snack. You'll have to tell him."

"Well, it was like this," said Acott. "After we had something to eat, it was getting on for seven o'clock. My train didn't leave King's Cross till 8.25, but I said we might as well get along that way and have a drink somewhere while we were waiting. Dick was going to see me off and then go back home, you understand, Inspector."

Arnold nodded. "Yes, I understand, Mr. Acott," he said. "Go on."

"We took the tube from Piccadilly to King's Cross and found a very decent pub close to the station. We had an hour to spend, and, as Dick has told you, we had a few drinks. And I'm sorry to say that Dick got most infernally tight. I've never known him to be in such a state; he was alternately quarrelsome and affectionate, and he could hardly stand up."

"I didn't know what to begin to do with him. There wasn't time for me to take him home and put him to bed. I daren't leave him wandering around, for sooner or later he'd have been run in for a certainty. And then I remembered that there were a lot of cheap little hotels round about where they didn't ask too many awkward questions. So I marched him off to the first of these I saw, paid for his bed and saw him up to his room. Then I dashed back to the station and just managed to catch my train which left at 8.25. I can't imagine why Dick came over like that. We both had exactly the same to drink, and I was as fresh as a daisy."

"I'd have signed the pledge on Thursday morning if any one had asked me to," said Dick. "As it was, I struggled to Harwich, got through the day somehow and came back in the evening. That's why I didn't get Mrs. Repton's telegram until then. And then, of course, I came down by the first train in the morning. I asked Harry what he thought and he told me it was the best thing I could do."

"Mr. Acott didn't come down here with you, did he?" Arnold asked.

"Oh no. He got home just after I did and I showed him the telegram. He said he'd go to the office as usual this morning and explain what had happened. But when I was in Buckley this morning I felt a bit bowled over. It was a bit of a shock, you know, the poor old dad dying suddenly like that. And

I didn't fancy staying here all by myself, with only Mrs. Repton and Grace to talk to. So I rang up Harry at the office and asked him to wangle a few days' leave. He managed it, met me in Buckley and we came out here together."

"I didn't have any difficulty," said Acott. "The boss is a jolly good sort and quite understood. I told him that Dick was pretty badly cut up and he said at once that I'd better go and keep him company until after the funeral. He knows that he and I have been chums ever since Dick came to work with the firm."

Arnold nodded and turned to Dick. "Did your father ever tell you that he suspected that coal was being stolen from the school cellar?" he asked.

"Yes, he talked a lot about it when I was here at Christmas-time. He said that it must be either Mrs. Day or one of the teachers. He'd been watching Mrs. Day pretty closely, and didn't see how she could take any quantity of coal home with her on her bicycle. I said if any one had taken the stuff it was much more likely to be Joe Masters."

Arnold dimly remembered Mrs. Day mentioning that name before. "Who is Joe Masters?" he asked.

"Oh, he's the village bad hat. He'll turn his hand to anything, carpentry, or a bit of plumbing, or anything that comes his way. He might make quite a decent living at it, for he's a jolly good workman when he pleases. But he has a way of starting a job and then wandering off to the Red Lion and spending the rest of the day there. So people have got a bit shy of sending for him. And I'm pretty sure that he's not above picking up anything that he sees lying about."

Arnold made a mental note to talk to Green about Joe Masters.

"Were your father and this man on good terms?" he asked.

Dick smiled faintly. "Hardly," he replied. "Dad employed Joe to do a job for him last year and they fell out over it. I don't know the details but I gather there was a bit of a scene. I wasn't there at the time, I never came down more than three or four times a year, you know."

After some further conversation Arnold and Merriion left The Spinney. "What do we do next?" the latter asked.

"We go and call on Mr. Wenlock," Arnold replied. "He'll be back from his office by now. I haven't seen him yet and I'm rather anxious to make his acquaintance. His house is at the other end of the village. It won't take us more than a few minutes to walk there."

They reached the house which was known as Court Lodge and on inquiring for Mr. Wenlock were shown into the dining-room. A few minutes later Mr. Wenlock appeared. He was

in the forties, tall, well set-up, and with a shrewd and capable expression. He nodded to the inspector and Merrion. "Well, gentlemen, what can I do for you?" he asked briskly.

"I am investigating the death of Mr. Polesworth," Arnold replied. "And my friend, Mr. Merrion, is assisting me."

Wenlock nodded. "Yes, so I gathered," he said. "Poor old Polesworth. He was a bit of an ass, but I never thought he'd do away with himself like that."

Wenlock had obviously heard Dr. Stowe's version of the affair, but Arnold let this pass. "It is a bad business," he replied. "You will understand that I am bound to interrogate everybody who had anything to do with him. You called to see him on Wednesday afternoon, I understand, Mr. Wenlock?"

"Yes, I came back from the office early on purpose, but he wouldn't see me. It sounds a bit heartless to say so now, but he was as pig-headed as they make 'em."

"Would you mind telling me what you wanted to see him about?"

"Not a bit. But it's rather a long story, I'm afraid. Polesworth had suspected for a long time that someone was stealing coal from the school. I don't believe it myself for, while I was correspondent, I never had any cause to imagine such a thing. But Polesworth kept on brooding over it, and at last he got it into his head that Miss Bowring was the culprit."

"He came to see me about it one day last week, Saturday afternoon to be exact. He said that he was perfectly satisfied that the coal was disappearing and that the only person who could be taking it was Miss Bowring. He was determined to put a stop to it, and he told me that he meant to write to the County Education Committee."

"I told him in so many words not to be a fool. I said that he had no definite proof and that it was ridiculous to kick up a fuss for the sake of half a hundred-weight of coal. He replied that it was not a question of the value of the coal but a matter of principle. I tried to talk him round but it was no earthly use. When he left here he was still insisting that he would write to the Education Committee."

"I didn't think much more about it, for I have plenty of other things on my mind. But on Wednesday morning I got a letter from him. Just a formal note, enclosing for my information as one of the managers, a copy of the letter he had written to the Education Committee. I've got that in my pocket now, if you'd like to see it."

"I should very much like to see it, if you have no objection, Mr. Wenlock," Arnold replied.

Wenlock produced the letter and handed it to the inspector. It ran as follows :

TO THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION,

CLAYTONSHIRE EDUCATION COMMITTEE.

DEAR SIR,—I beg to draw your attention to paragraph 28 of the regulations issued by your Committee. This paragraph lays down that the Managers of a voluntary school should not dismiss or require the resignation of a teacher without previously obtaining the sanction of the Committee upon a statement of the Managers' reason.

I regret to inform you that the managers of Middleden Elementary School have reason to believe that for some time past the head teacher, Miss Caroline Bowring, has been pilfering coal from the school stock. In view of this the managers request the sanction of the Committee for the dismissal of Miss Bowring. The managers also request the Committee to arrange for the supply of a temporary teacher until such time as a fresh appointment can be made.

Arnold handed the copy back. "That letter was actually sent to the Education Committee?" he asked.

"I suppose so. In his covering note to me, Polesworth said that he intended to send it. I couldn't go and see him at once, as I had an appointment in Buckley that I couldn't put off. But as I tell you, I came back early that afternoon and tried to see him. I was going to try to persuade him not to take any action until at least a meeting of the managers had been called."

"Did the other managers approve of Mr. Polesworth's attitude?" Arnold asked.

Wenlock shrugged his shoulders. "I don't suppose they either approved or disapproved," he replied. "Like most managers they're apt to leave things pretty much in the hands of the correspondent. It saves them a lot of trouble. And, after all, he's the fellow who has to do the job."

"The post of correspondent is entirely honorary, I understand?"

"Oh, entirely. Quite a lot of kicks and no halfpence. I was correspondent of this school for some years and I know."

"You found the duties too onerous, perhaps?" Arnold suggested.

"Well, hardly that. Although a correspondent has quite a lot to do one way or another, I didn't mind that. But I did object to being treated like a schoolboy by the chairman. Have you met the vicar yet?"

"Not yet. Is he of the domineering type?"

"He's a very good parson in his way, but he's got the idea that every one else is only semi-civilised. He treats them accordingly."

"I see. But we're getting away from Mr. Polesworth. Apart from your official relationship, were you on friendly terms with him?"

"I tried to be," Wenlock replied. "But it was pretty heavy going, I don't mind telling you. Polesworth was one of those people who go about the world looking for trouble. I believe he thought that the rest of humanity was in league to annoy him in every possible way. If you said good-morning to him, he looked at you as if it were an insult. You know what I mean."

Arnold nodded. "I know exactly what you mean," he replied. "Mr. Polesworth can hardly have been popular locally?"

"Well, to be quite candid, he wasn't. He had an extraordinary gift for getting people's backs up. If you live in a village like this you've got to be prepared for a certain amount of give and take. You've got to put up cheerfully with a few petty annoyances which are unavoidable. You've got to take an interest in all the local activities and contribute to them. In fact, you've got to enter, to some extent at least, into the life of the community."

"But Polesworth wouldn't do any of these things. The only things that interested him were those blessed orchids of his. If anything or anybody annoyed him, he'd complain bitterly and threaten all sorts of penalties. He wouldn't contribute a penny to any of the parish funds or to the local sports club. And if any of the poorer folk of the village were in trouble, he wouldn't stretch out a finger to help them. He didn't drink, and he didn't smoke, and it seemed to be a definite grievance with him that other people did. So, you may imagine that, all things considered, the village won't exactly wear mourning for him."

"Apart from his general unpopularity, did he have any particular enemies?"

"Well, as his hand was against every one, every one's hand was more or less against his. I dare say there are very few people in the parish who wouldn't have taken the chance of scoring off him if they'd seen it."

"Did you go to the whist drive and dance on Wednesday evening, Mr. Wenlock?"

"No, that sort of thing is hardly in my line. But there you are again. It is an understood thing that everybody who can afford to, gives a prize at these functions. It all helps the funds of the particular concern which they are in aid of,

For instance, this last time, I gave a cigarette case for a man's prize, and a handbag for a woman's. But Polesworth wouldn't give anything, not he. He didn't see why he should spend money on other people's amusement."

Arnold nodded, but kept to his point. "It was a filthy evening on Wednesday, I am told. You stayed comfortably at home, I dare say, Mr. Wenlock?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I didn't. I had some business with a farmer who lives a few miles from here. So about half-past eight I took out the car and drove out to his place. I stayed with him quite a long time, and didn't get home until about midnight."

"Did you happen to pass the school on your way?"

"Yes, I did, both coming and going."

"Did you notice anything unusual there?"

"I didn't, but then I wasn't looking. It was as much as I could do to see the road ahead of me in the driving rain. I don't remember seeing a soul on my way home until I came to the village hall. There were a few people coming away from the dance, and seeing one of my maids among them, I stopped and gave her a lift home."

"Just one more question, Mr. Wenlock," said Arnold. "Did Mr. Polesworth ring you up at your office in Buckley, recently?"

Wenlock shook his head. "Not so far as I am aware," he replied. "If he did I wasn't told about it."

Arnold glanced at his watch. "Thanks very much, Mr. Wenlock," he said. "I've wasted quite enough of your valuable time."

"Oh, that's all right," Wenlock replied easily. "I'm always ready to help the police. Can I offer either of you a cocktail? No. Well, you know best, of course."

He showed them out and they started to walk back to the Red Lion. On their way they met Green, who, recognising the inspector, jumped off his bicycle.

"I want to see you, Green," said Arnold. "What do you know about a man called Joe Masters?"

"Why, it's queer that you should ask that, sir," Green replied. "I've just come from his place. The spouting round my house has come away and I wanted him to put it right for me. But he wasn't there and his wife told me that she hadn't seen him since first thing yesterday."

"Does she know where he's gone to?"

"No, she doesn't, sir. All he told her was that if she didn't see him for a day or two she wasn't to worry. He's like that, sir. He takes it into his head to go away like that sometimes. He has a good booze-up, and then dosses down

in a barn or somewhere to sleep it off. He'll come back when he's spent out, as Mrs. Masters knows well enough."

"He's a bit of a bad character, isn't he?" Arnold asked.

"Well, I don't know that I'd go so far as to say that, sir. He's a good enough workman but he's not as steady as he might be, that's all."

"Was he at the whist drive and dance on Wednesday?"

"Well, it was like this, sir. He and his wife both went to the whist drive. That was over a little before ten, and Joe went to the Red Lion for a drink. He stuck there until closing time, ten o'clock, and then went home. Mrs. Masters stayed on with the dancers and when she got back after midnight she found him in bed."

"He had quarrelled with Mr. Polesworth, hadn't he?" Arnold asked.

"So I've heard say, sir. It was over a job he did for Mr. Polesworth last year. Mr. Polesworth said he hadn't done it properly, and wouldn't pay him his money. They had a bit of an argument about it from what I heard at the time."

Merrion, who had been listening attentively to this conversation, suddenly put in a word.

"He's a good workman you said, Green. Has he ever been employed by the school authorities?"

"I couldn't say, I'm sure, sir," Green replied. "It's quite likely, for nearly everybody round about calls him in if they want an odd job done. Wait a minute though. Now I come to think of it, he fitted that chain and padlock on the coal-cellar door two years back. There used to be a clumsy old lock that got broken, and Joe fitted the padlock instead. That was when Mr. Wenlock was looking after the school, sir."

After telling Green to let him know as soon as Joe Masters returned, Arnold went on his way towards the Red Lion accompanied by Merrion. They reached their sitting-room in which Mrs. Cadby had made up a roaring fire.

"That's good," said Arnold, warming his hands in front of it. "Well, what fresh theory have you formed since we've been out and about?"

"I haven't been forming theories, I've been studying feet," Merrion replied. "Young Dick Polesworth has got a comparatively small foot. I expect he takes ~~sevens~~ as a rule, but a size eight wouldn't be uncomfortably big for him. His friend Acott's feet are slightly larger. I'm pretty sure he was wearing size eight shoes when we saw him just now. But neither of those bright lads was wearing shoes with Uskide soles."

"On the other hand, as you may have noticed, Wenlock was wearing a pair of brogue shoes with Uskide soles. But he's got a foot like an elephant and must take size elevens at least. He couldn't squeeze his feet into a number eight shoe. We haven't seen Masters' feet yet, but I very much doubt that he wears Uskide-soled shoes."

"I'm not so wrapped up in that footprint as you are," said Arnold. "There's nothing about it to show that it had any connection with Polesworth's death. If you're going to stick to your theory that he was murdered, you'll have to find some more convincing motive than we've heard of yet."

"Oh, I don't know," Merrion replied. "What would you consider a convincing motive, I wonder? Master Dick comes in for the by no means contemptible sum of £50,000."

"I dare say, but Master Dick's ruled out. At the time of his father's death he was lying dead drunk in some disreputable haunt near King's Cross."

Merrion smiled. "You were talking about motive, not opportunity," he said. "Then we come to the possibilities of revenge; Polesworth seems to have done his best to make himself disagreeable to quite a lot of people."

"That's just it!" Arnold exclaimed. "If a man makes himself disagreeable to you, you don't go to the extreme lengths of murdering him. But you might, if you saw your opportunity, play a practical joke on him, such as locking him up in a coal-cellar for the night. The more I hear about this affair the more I'm convinced that it was a joke."

"Well, have it your own way," said Merrion. "I'm just as firmly convinced that Polesworth was murdered."

"On account of that ridiculous letter he wrote to the County Education Committee, I suppose?" replied Arnold sarcastically.

"Why not? People have been murdered for less than that. I hope you've noticed the curious behaviour of at least three people."

"I've noticed quite a lot of things one way and another. What exactly do you happen to mean?"

"Wenlock was out in his car at the time Polesworth left his house. Joe Masters took it into his head next morning to wander off into the unknown. And Grace Repton has gone to her aunt's in Buckley at the very time when you would have thought that her mother needed her most. Now I wonder——?"

But Arnold was not to hear that particular flight of his friend's imagination just then. The door opened and Mrs. Cadby appeared.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, gentlemen," she said. "But

young Mr. Polesworth's here and he would like to see the Inspector at once."

Arnold and Merrion followed her downstairs and found Dick Polesworth, breathless and highly perturbed.

"Oh, I say Inspector!" he exclaimed. "A most amazing thing has happened. I wish you'd come along to The Spinney at once."

CHAPTER IX

THE three of them set off at a sharp pace for The Spinney. "What happened, Mr. Polesworth?" Arnold asked.

"Harry's been attacked," Dick replied. "It's the most extraordinary thing. I haven't heard all about it myself yet. As soon as he came in and told me what had happened to him, I came along for you at once. You see, I thought you ought to know about it."

"Quite right," said Arnold. "Is Mr. Acott injured? What about sending for Dr. Stowe?"

"Oh, I don't think it's as bad as that, luckily. But you shall see for yourself."

They reached The Spinney and Dick showed the way into the sitting-room. Sitting in a chair by the fire was Harry Acott. He looked up as they entered, displaying a nasty weal running diagonally across the left side of his face from the temple to the jaw bone.

"Hallo, Inspector," he said. "Dick's told you about my adventure, then?"

"He has told me that you were attacked," Arnold replied. "You seem to have been hit on the side of the head. How did it happen?"

"I'll tell you exactly," Acott said. "I always like to take a sharp walk before supper. Dick will bear me out in that, for he knows that I often walk a good part of the way home from the office. It keeps me fit and gives me an appetite."

"Well, just now, about six o'clock it was, I thought it was time for me to take my evening stroll. I knew it was no good asking Dick to come with me, for he's a lazy devil and never walks a step further than he can help. But I did ask him if I could borrow a cap and a raincoat. You see, I brought practically nothing with me but what I stood up in. That's right, isn't it, Dick?"

Young Polesworth nodded. "I always keep a few old clothes here to wear when I come down," he said. "I found Harry what he wanted and saw him start out."

"Oh, yes, I started out all right," said Acott. "I took the road leading away from the village. It was pretty nearly as dark as it is now—only just light enough for me to see the road in front of me. I walked pretty fast, and it struck me that there were very few people about. A car passed me going towards the village I remember, but I didn't see anybody else. I walked straight ahead, thinking that if I came to a pub I'd go in and have a drink. But I didn't see a sign of one."

"After I'd gone a mile or perhaps a mile and a half, I came to a cross-roads. There didn't seem to be any point in going much farther. I didn't know the country and I might have gone on indefinitely without finding a pub. So I turned round and started home again."

"There's a pub not a quarter of a mile beyond the cross-roads," said Dick. "If you'd kept on a little longer you'd have seen it."

"I wish I had, for then I shouldn't have got this wallop across the head. As I say, I turned round to come back by the way I came. I can't have been more than three or four hundred yards from the cross-roads when I saw a push-bike coming towards me."

"Hold on a minute," said Arnold. "Let's get the facts exactly. You couldn't see a bicycle coming towards you in the dark, could you?"

"Sorry, Inspector. I'll try and express myself more accurately. I saw a bright light coming along the road towards me. It was travelling too fast for a man carrying a lantern. There was no noise so it couldn't be a motor-bike. The only thing it could have been was a push-bike with a powerful acetylene lamp."

"I didn't take any particular notice of it. Why should I? With a light like that, whoever was riding the bike could see me clearly enough. I just sheared off to the side of the road to give him plenty of room to get by. I want to make it quite clear to you that I didn't see the rider. His light was far too dazzling for that. So dazzling that I kept my head down to shield my face with the peak of the cap."

"When he got within a few paces of me, the fellow jumped off his bike. I could hear but still I couldn't see him, for he kept that confounded lamp shining straight in my eyes. He stood still and just before I got up with him, he called out. 'I say, mate, is this the way to'—some place I didn't catch the name of. I was just going to tell him that I was a stranger in these parts and hadn't the remotest idea, when I sensed a sudden movement. You know what I mean. I couldn't see anything, but I felt that something was going to happen."

I flung up my arm, but it was too late. Before I knew where I was, I was staggering back with a terrific welt across the face. It took me a split second to pull myself together and by that time the fellow was pedalling away like hell towards the cross-roads. I hollered after him but he didn't take the slightest notice. And it wasn't any use going after him and trying to catch him up. He was going much too fast for that. But why the dickens he should give me a welt like that is more than I can make out. Perhaps it's a playful habit of the locals about here."

"He appears to have used a weapon of some kind," Arnold remarked.

"He did," replied Acott feelingly. "And he used it pretty strongly, I can tell you. It's a wonder I wasn't knocked out. As it was, I felt pretty groggy as I walked here. I didn't meet any one else on my way home, I may say."

"The man didn't say anything as he hit you, did he?"

"Not a word. He'd hardly finished asking me the way when he struck out. And the trouble is I haven't the remotest idea what he was like. Had a rough husky sort of voice, that's all I can tell you. He must have come from the village here. There are no side turnings off that road, are there, Dick?"

"Not until you get to the cross-roads where you turned back."

"You had lent your friend an old raincoat and cap of yours, Mr. Polesworth?" Arnold asked.

"I'll show them to you," Dick replied. He went out into the hall and returned with the garments in question. The cap was brown with a wide brim and had not apparently been much worn. The raincoat was of a light fawn colour, and had evidently seen some years of service.

"You wear this cap and coat yourself when you are staying down here, Mr. Polesworth?"

"That's what I keep them here for," Dick replied. "I always wear them if I happen to go down to the village."

"Did you go out much when you were staying here? Your friend tells me that you don't care much about walking."

"Not in the sense he means. I don't go out for five mile walks just for the fun of it. But I always used to slip down to the village once or twice a day when I was staying here. Usually I'd offer to post the poor old dad's letters for him. And as I dare say you've noticed, the post office is just beyond the Red Lion."

"Yes, I have noticed that," Arnold replied. "You used the Red Lion as a convenient port of call, I dare say?"

"You've got it," said Dick. "You see, the poor old

dad didn't drink anything much himself and didn't like any one else to. I always used to bring a bottle of whisky down with me and have a nip when I'd gone upstairs to bed. But it was a long time to wait till bedtime, you know."

"So you went into the Red Lion wearing that cap and coat? How often did that happen?"

"As often as I could manage it without the dad spotting anything. Always once, and sometimes twice, a day, every time I was down here."

Acott whistled. "So that's it, is it?" he exclaimed. "Confound you, Dick. I'll take jolly good care not to wear your old clothes again."

"I think it's pretty clear that Mr. Acott's assailant took him to be you, Mr. Polesworth," said Arnold. "He said that he kept his head down so that the light shouldn't dazzle him, and therefore his face was hidden. The man on the bicycle could only see the cap and coat, which he probably recognised. Have you any enemies in the village to your knowledge?"

"I hope not," Dick replied. "But half the parish seems to have had a down on the poor old dad."

"Well, it's a pretty rotten trick to play, whoever he meant it for," said Acott. "What was this fellow carrying to hit me with like that?"

"It looks as though he had used a heavy bar of some kind," Arnold replied. "You're lucky not to have been more badly damaged than you are."

"I fancy that I drew back just in time. I told you I had an inspiration that something was going to happen. If only I could have caught the chap I would have given him a damned good thrashing anyhow."

"He would have deserved it," said Arnold. "We'll do our best to lay him by the heels, but without any sort of description it will be a little difficult. Somebody may have seen him riding through the village and recognised him. That's our only hope. You couldn't identify him, of course?"

Acott shook his head. "I never even saw him. I know you'll do your best, Inspector, but I'm very much afraid he's got away with it."

Arnold and Merriion left The Spinney and returned to the Red Lion. "Queer things happen in this secluded hamlet," said the latter when they had regained their sitting-room. "What do you make of this latest development?"

"I shan't rush to the conclusion that it was a deliberate attempt to murder Acott," replied Arnold dryly.

"No, it was just a friendly greeting like a clap on the back, I dare say. Seriously though, what do you make of it?"

"Of, I think it's pretty obvious. There's someone about who has a grudge, real or fancied, against Polesworth and his son, Dick. This person is the practical joker who locked the door on Polesworth senior; he must know by this time that his joke resulted in Polesworth's death, but I dare say that doesn't worry him much."

"Still harping on the same string," said Merrion. "Never mind, carry on with the monotone."

Arnold did not allow himself to be put out of his stride by Merrion's remarks. "This person, who may or may not be entirely responsible for his actions, was riding through the village on his bicycle this evening, carrying with him a short crowbar, shall we say. On his way to some unknown destination, he sees a man walking along the road towards him. When he gets near enough to him he recognises the cap and coat as belonging to young Dick Polesworth. He and Acott are much the same height, and though Acott is the heftier of the two, a loose raincoat would conceal that. The man on the bicycle jumps to the conclusion that it is Dick, and determines to carry his vendetta a step farther. He guesses that with his bicycle lamp shining in his eyes, Dick won't recognise him. So he stops him by asking him the way and then biffs him one with the crowbar. Before his victim has time to recover from the blow he jumps on his bicycle and rides off."

"It wasn't a crowbar," said Merrion, shaking his head. "It was something softer or at all events more resilient than that. If you hit a man across the face with a crowbar you'll break the skin to a certainty. Now Acott's skin, as you probably noticed as soon as I did, was not broken. But he had a nasty bruise which I'm perfectly sure that Dr. Stowe would describe as a contusion."

"Well, there you are!" Arnold exclaimed. "You're hinting that the weapon used was the one with which Mr. Polesworth senior was knocked out. Isn't that just another proof that I'm right? The same weapon suggests the same assailant."

"Oh yes, you're right up to a point," Merrion conceded. "But still I don't believe that Polesworth senior was locked in the coal-cellar as an exhibition of playfulness. Nor do I believe that this last encounter was accidental."

"Well, let's hear your version," said Arnold tolerantly.

"Here it is then, though I'll admit that I've got no evidence whatever to support it. I believe that the attacker, whom we'll call the man with the bicycle, was watching The Spinney. He saw someone come out and, as you say, jumped to the conclusion that it was Dick Polesworth. He saw him walk off up the road, which he knew had no side turnings for a

considerable distance and would probably be deserted after dark on a winter's evening. He knew then that it would not be difficult to overtake the pedestrian before he reached the cross-roads.

"I don't think he had the bicycle with him while he was watching the house. He would have overtaken Acott on his outward journey if he had. It took him several minutes, fifteen or twenty, I imagine, to fetch his bicycle. Having fetched it he started off in pursuit, expecting to overtake the victim before he reached the cross-roads."

"Why before he reached the cross-roads?" Arnold asked.

"Because, having reached them he might have taken any one of three directions and the trail would have been lost. But Acott, as he told us himself, is a fast walker. He had reached the cross-roads and turned back again before the man with the bicycle caught up with him."

"What was this man watching The Spinney for?" Arnold asked.

"Because he had an account of some sort to settle with young Dick. What it was, I'm not going to guess. Dick could tell you if he cared to, I dare say, but I doubt if he will."

"Have you guessed at the man's identity?"

"I'd like a quiet and confidential chat with the elusive Joe Masters," Merrion replied. "Lots of little things we've heard about that individual arouse my curiosity. He left the hall on Wednesday night before the dancing started about ten o'clock. His wife found him comfortably tucked up in bed some time after midnight. Where had he been in the interval?"

"Don't forget the anonymous letter," Arnold remarked. "I don't imagine somehow that Joe Masters uses a typewriter."

Merrion rubbed his chin reflectively. "One for you," he replied. "That is, if the anonymous letter, as you call it, has anything to do with it. But, by jove!"

"I perceive the alarming symptoms of a flash of inspiration," said Arnold calmly. "What is it now?"

"That soft broad-pointed pencil!" exclaimed Merrion excitedly. "It's perfectly obvious, and I was an ass not to think of it before. It was a carpenter's pencil, of course. That's another point against Joe. We know that he's always ready to undertake a job of carpentry."

"When and why did Joe write Wenlock's Buckley telephone number on a scrap of paper which was part of a letter addressed to Polesworth?"

"I don't know yet. It's one of those things that want

thinking over. Joe had a definite grievance against Polesworth. He hadn't been paid for a job of work he'd done for him. And isn't it a bit significant that it was Joe who fitted the padlock to the cellar door?"

"Not particularly," said Arnold. "You're rather apt to see significance where there isn't any, you know."

"You don't use your imagination enough, as I'm always telling you. Joe is given the job of fitting the chain and padlock and duly does it. What does he do then? Hands over the key to someone—Mrs. Day, probably. She says a thing like that is likely to get lost with all those kids about. He says 'right, then, I'll fix a block of wood to it, and you can hang it up somewhere out of reach.' She says, 'That'll do fine, Joe. There's a nail above the fireplace in the main classroom that will just do champion.' So when Joe wanted the key he knew exactly where to find it."

"But he didn't find it," Arnold replied. "Polesworth found it for him."

"That's just where we differ," said Merrion. "I've already explained my reasons for believing that Polesworth never set foot inside the school on Wednesday night."

"I know you have. But I don't find them altogether convincing. Besides, you aren't consistent. You're suggesting now that Joe Masters deliberately murdered Polesworth. Also by way of adding a finishing touch to his vengeance, he biffed Acott one on the head, mistaking him for Master Dick. His motive for this un-Christian behaviour was that Polesworth wouldn't pay him the few shillings that he owed him. Does that strike you as being entirely probable?"

"Are motives for murder ever entirely probable? Besides, that may not have been Joe's only motive. I shouldn't be surprised if there was some dark and secret story we haven't unravelled yet. I wonder what the assailant will do when he finds he biffed the wrong man."

"He won't call on Acott and apologise, you may be sure of that. What do you expect him to do?"

"Have another go," Merrion replied promptly. "I tell you, queer things happen in this parish. If I were you I'd tell the estimable Green to keep his eye on The Spinney especially after dark."

"Green's got enough to do already if he carries out my instructions. That's not a bad idea, though. I'll have a word with the local superintendent in the morning, and get him to draft another couple of men here. And for to-night, well, we'll take the job on ourselves. How does that appeal to you?"

"Not over much," Merrion replied. "Still, rather than

let you down, I'll keep you company. You noticed that tall hedge next to The Spinney, between the field and the road, I dare say."

"Yes, I noticed it," Arnold replied. "And it's behind that hedge that you and I are going to spend a few hours of the night. But somehow, I'm not expecting very much to happen."

At that moment Mrs. Cadby came in to lay the supper. After doing justice to the generous meal she provided, Merrion lighted a cigarette.

"I have a feeling that nothing much is likely to happen until after turning out time," he said. "I'll tell you what. You cut along and make yourself nice and snug behind that hedge. I'll go and sit in the bar until ten o'clock and then join you."

"Now that's what I call really unselfish," Arnold exclaimed. "You know jolly well that Cadby keeps a blazing fire in the bar."

"I also know that one can pick up a lot of useful information by sitting in the local pub. It's just possible that I may overhear a scrap of conversation that would be helpful. You cut along and I'll join you as soon as ever Cadby turns his customers out at ten o'clock."

Arnold, not without some natural reluctance, agreed to this arrangement. He went off and, after some preliminary reconnaissance found a suitable position for himself. This was at a spot behind the hedge from which he could watch both the road in front of him and the entrance to The Spinney. Fortunately for him the night, though dark, was fine and not too cold. He waited for an hour and a half during which period very little traffic passed him. A solitary car, two or three bicycles and a couple of women on foot. And then he heard the front door of The Spinney open. Then came a voice which he recognised as Dick Polesworth's. "I shan't be more than a few minutes, old chap."

Footsteps came along the path to the gate. This opened, a shadowy figure emerged and turned towards the village.

Arnold listened until the footsteps faded away in the distance. Then came silence which lasted for quarter of an hour. After this the footsteps became audible again. They approached until the same shadowy figure could be seen. It turned in at the gate of The Spinney and once again Arnold heard the front door open and shut.

A moment later a second figure, moving noiselessly, materialised out of the darkness. It paused in the road outside the hedge and emitted a low but distinctive whistle.

"You'll find the gate a few yards farther up," said Arnold quietly.

Merrion joined him. "Not so warm here as it was in the bar," he said. "Young hopeful got home all right, I suppose?"

"Yes, I heard the front door shut behind him," Arnold replied. "He went to the pub?"

"He did. I was sitting in the bar enjoying a pint and the conversation of the oldest inhabitant when he came in. He nodded to me but he didn't ask me to have a drink, I noticed. However, he ordered a double whisky for himself, added precious little water to it and drank it down in a couple of gulps. Then he ordered another which he polished off nearly as quickly. Do you know, I don't altogether trust people who drink whisky at that rate."

"It's a matter of taste, I suppose," Arnold remarked tolerantly.

"Lack of taste, you mean. Well, after he'd swallowed his two drinks he ordered a bottle of whisky, put it in his overcoat pocket and walked out. I gave him half a minute's start and came out after him. I thought that perhaps the man with the bicycle might be on the look out for him. But as it turned out, there wasn't a soul to be seen between the Red Lion and here."

"What was Dick wearing?" Arnold asked. "I couldn't see him, of course."

"Not the raincoat and cap we saw this afternoon. He had a soft grey felt hat and a dark blue overcoat. Perhaps he thought it safer. And there's another thing I noticed."

"About his clothes?"

"No, about his welcome. According to Dick's own account he used the Red Lion pretty freely when he's down here. And you know as well as I do what it is when you go into a pub where you're known. Everybody has a word to say to you, if it's only good-evening. There must have been a round dozen of the locals in the Red Lion when Dick came in, but not one of them took the trouble to speak to him."

"You mean that they weren't exactly pleased to see him?"

"I don't mean that they glared at him angrily, or that there was any open manifestation of hostility. They just tried not to see him, if you know what I mean."

"I know. Did you pick up any local gossip?"

"Any amount. But nothing that had any obvious bearing on our affair. And when you come to think of it, that's rather odd. Usually when an unexplained death takes place in a village nobody talks of anything else all week. But this evening I didn't so much as hear Polesworth's name mentioned."

"Because you were there perhaps? Country folk very often don't care about talking before strangers."

"You haven't met my friend the oldest inhabitant. He likes talking all right. But although I tried as delicately as I could to bring him round to the subject he shied off every time. And I kept my ears open for what other people might be saying, too. Let me see if I can remember how many of them there were when I came out. At one side of the room there were four fellows playing darts, and marvelously well they threw. At the other side of the room was another party of four playing nap. The oldest inhabitant and myself sat in a corner by the fire. Two others were leaning on the counter talking to Mr. Cadby. And not a word about Polesworth between the lot of them."

"Do you know what I believe it is? They all have a pretty good idea who the practical joker was, but they're all so jolly pleased that Polesworth is out of the way that they don't want to ask awkward questions."

"I shouldn't wonder," Merrion replied; "in which case Mr. Cadby must be secretly amused at your activities. By the way, I did suggest that I was alone this evening because you'd had to go to Buckley."

"Very diplomatic of you. And am I supposed to have gone there on foot?"

"Why not? It's barely five miles by road and a lot less than that if you take the short cut across the fields. Or so the oldest inhabitant told me. He used to walk there and back to work every day, and he was getting on for sixty-five. And as I dare say you've noticed, there's a railway time-table hanging up in the bar. I happened to look at it and noticed that the last train to town leaves Buckley at eleven-thirty-five and gets to London at twelve-forty-five."

"What about it?" Arnold asked. "Are you thinking of catching it? It's barely half-past ten now and you'd have plenty of time for a nice walk over the fields to Buckley."

"It would be a jolly sight warmer than waiting behind this confounded hedge. No, it's just one of those pieces of information that may be worth bearing in mind. Hush, there's somebody about."

They had been talking in voices hardly above a whisper. Merrion's quick ear had caught the distant sound of a bicycle tyre upon the damp surface of the road. Within a few seconds, Arnold heard it too.

The cyclist was undoubtedly breaking the law by riding without a light, for peering through the hedge they could see nothing of him. He was coming, not from the village, but from the direction of the cross-roads which had been the scene

of Acott's unpleasant adventure. The noise of the tyres ceased when it could have been no farther than twenty yards from them. And half a minute later, a furtive shadow passed down the road in front of them. Was it bound for The Spinney?

Already Arnold and Merrion were moving noiselessly towards the gate of the field. And then suddenly they heard a faint click, followed by the grating of a hinge.

"By jove!" Merrion whispered excitedly. "The iron gate leading into the school playground."

CHAPTER X

THEY reached the field gate in single file, Arnold leading. All at once there was a muffled clatter followed by a dull thud. Merrion stopped dead in his tracks. "What is it?" he whispered.

"It's that confounded bicycle," Arnold answered. He picked himself up and rubbed his shins tenderly. "I fell head over heels over the blasted thing. I might have guessed he'd left it just inside the gate."

"Well, don't make any more noise," said Merrion. "He's probably heard the racket you made as it is. Listen!"

But as they stood still with their ears strained, they could hear nothing. Very cautiously they passed through the gateway into the road. Keeping close under the shadow of the hedge they moved down the road until they were opposite the iron gate of the playground. Merrion, the lighter of the two, darted noiselessly across and tried it. It was unlocked. As Arnold reached his side, Merrion clutched him by the arm.

"Look!" he whispered in his ear. "The coal-cellar."

There was no doubt about it. The coal-cellar door was ajar, and a faint light showed through the opening. Listening intently they could hear the sound of stealthy movements from within.

"We'll catch him when he comes out," Arnold whispered quietly. "Look out, though, he's probably got a weapon of some kind."

They withdrew behind the shelter of the corner of the school and waited. But not for long. Within a couple of minutes, the shadow reappeared at the iron gate. Once more the hinges grated and the bolt of the lock shot home. Then Arnold switched on his torch.

Thus revealed to Merrion's eyes was a short stocky figure

bare-headed but with a muffler wrapped round his neck. He had been carrying a wooden trug full of lumps of coal, but he let this fall with a terrific crash as the light fell upon him. He stood there rigid and speechless, blinded by the powerful light which Arnold kept full in his face.

So for an instant the three of them stood, while Arnold satisfied himself that the man carried no weapon in his hand. Then, followed by Merrion, he advanced upon him.

"Now then, what are you up to?" he asked.

At the sound of the strange voice, the man found his speech. "And what might you be up to?" he retorted. "Frightening honest folk out of their wits at this time of night. And who might you be either?"

"I'm an inspector from Scotland Yard," Arnold replied. "And I've caught you in the very act of stealing coal from the school. Now, don't you play any tricks. There are a couple of us here and we shan't stand for any nonsense."

The man, leaving the trug and the coal to their fate, turned suddenly as though to make a dash for it. But before he could move more than a step, Merrion's powerful grip had both his arms firmly imprisoned.

"If you don't keep quiet I'll tie you up to those railings," said Merrion.

The man struggled impotently for a moment or two, then abruptly gave in. "Well, it's a fair cop," he said with an air of resignation.

"It is," Arnold replied. "Now, are you coming quietly? Or do you want us to frog-march you?"

"I'll come quietly enough guv'nor," the man replied. "It's a fair cop, that's what it is."

Closely guarding their captive on either side, Arnold and Merrion marched him to the local garage. Here they roused the proprietor and secured a car. In this the culprit was driven to Buckley police station and formally handed over by the inspector.

"Now then, suppose you tell us all about it," said Arnold after the necessary formalities had been gone through. "To begin with, what's your name?"

"Joe Masters," the other replied. "And I've got a wife and two children dependent upon me. And I couldn't bear to see them shivering without a single lump of coal in the house this bitter weather. That's why . . ."

"Now, don't you start talking nonsense," Arnold interrupted him. "It won't do you any good. We know all about you, I'd have you know. And we were watching you from the time you left your bicycle just inside the field gate. Where did you get the keys from? Come on, out with it."

Joe hesitated and looked helplessly round the charge room. "I just happened to come by them," he mumbled.

"You'd far better tell the truth," said Arnold warningly. "You've got two keys, one opening the iron gate and the other the padlock of the coal-cellar. Where did you get them from?"

Again Joe hesitated. And then apparently he decided that the game was up. "I've had them all along," he replied.

"What do you mean—all along? How long have you had them?"

"Ever since I fitted the chain and padlock to the coal-cellar door. The padlock when I bought it in Buckley had two keys, and I kept one back, thinking it would be useful if the other was lost at any time."

"Thinking that you could find a use for it yourself, you mean. And what about the key of the iron gate?"

"Well, you see, it was like this. When Mr. Polesworth took over from Mr. Wenlock, he asked for a set of keys to the school. There wasn't a spare one to the iron gate, so Mr. Polesworth borrowed one from Miss Bowring, gave it to me and told me to cut one like it. So while I was about it, I cut two, just in case."

"Just in case you wanted to pinch the coal at any time. I see. Now, tell us about Wednesday night."

"Wednesday night," said Joe slowly. "That'll be the night of the whist drive at the hall."

"Something else happened on Wednesday night," said Arnold sternly. "Now listen to me, Masters. It is my duty to warn you that anything you may say may subsequently be used in evidence. You and your wife went to the whist drive, didn't you?"

Joe nodded. "Yes, that's right," he replied. "Any one who was there will tell you that."

"You left the hall before the dancing began, at about ten o'clock. Where did you go then?"

But Joe became suddenly defiant. "That's no business of yours," he replied sulkily.

"I rather fancy that it is my business," said Arnold quietly. "What time was it when you turned the key in the coal-cellar padlock that night?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Joe replied. "I didn't touch the padlock that night. It isn't likely that I'd have gone in there when I was all dressed up for the whist drive, is it?"

"Oh, you were dressed up, were you? Wearing the shoes that you've got on now, I suppose? Hold up your foot and let me see the sole."

Joe looked astonished at this unexpected order. However, he held up his right foot so that the sole was clearly visible. He was wearing a pair of nearly new brown shoes, soled with Uskide of the exact pattern that Merrion had noticed in the coal-cellar.

"That'll do," said Arnold sharply. "You've got rather an expensive taste in shoes, haven't you? Did you buy them on purpose to wear at the whist drive?"

"I wasn't wearing them at the whist drive, and I didn't buy them," Joe replied sulkily. "I picked them up next morning."

"You won't do yourself any good by telling a lot of lies," said Arnold patiently. "You still refuse to say where you went when you left the hall on Wednesday evening?"

"I don't see why I should tell you anything which doesn't concern anybody but myself."

"Well, you can please yourself, but I warn you that I've got a pretty good idea already. Perhaps you'll tell me what time you got home?"

"About ten minutes before the missus got home from the dance. I can't rightly say what time it was."

"Did you go out again that night?"

"No, I stayed in bed and went to sleep. I didn't start off again until I'd had my breakfast next morning."

"Then where did you go?"

"Why, I jumped on my bike and rode over to Wrigley, a matter of fourteen miles from my place. Bill Carver that keeps the Bunch of Grapes there had asked me to come over and put his pig pound to rights. One of the rafters had gone and several of the tiles were missing. I told Bill that it would be a couple of days' work as soon as I clapped eyes on it, and so it was. And it was while I was on my way over, there that I picked up these shoes."

Arnold shook his head. "That's not a very likely story," he said. "Where did you pick them up?"

"About half a mile beyond the school going towards the cross-roads. It was mortal dark, for I'd left home at half-past six and I hadn't been out of the house ten minutes. But I saw something lying on the grass verge beside the road and I got off my bike to have a look. And then I saw that it was a pair of shoes, and I knew from the look of them that they'd just fit me."

"Do you often find new pairs of shoes lying by the road-side?"

"I've never had the luck to find a pair before," Joe replied regretfully.

"Or any one else either. Never mind, get on with your

fairy-tale. You rode to this place, Wrigley. How long did you stop there ? ”

“ Until I’d finished my job. Bill Carver found me in grub and gave me a shakedown in his loft on Thursday night.”

“ Why didn’t you tell your wife where you were going ? ”

“ What was the sense ? The more you tell a woman the more she wants to know. I’ve been away before for a night or two, so the missus wasn’t worrying.”

“ When did you leave Wrigley ? ”

“ Well, I finished up my job just as it was getting dark this evening. Then when Bill Carver had paid me for it, I went in his bar and had a pint or two. I dare say I started home between eight and half-past.”

“ Did you go home before you made your expedition to the coal-cellar ? ”

“ Well, I went home, but I didn’t go into the house. I didn’t want the missus asking any questions. I just went into the lodge, put away my tools and got out the old trug. You see, it’s like this. The missus doesn’t know anything about that coal business.”

“ You were ashamed to tell her, as well you might be. Now look here, Masters, you’ve got to realise that you’re in a pretty awkward fix. You know perfectly well that on Thursday morning Mr. Polesworth was found dead in the school coal-cellar.”

Joe’s amazement was positively ludicrous. “ Mr. Polesworth dead ! ” he exclaimed. “ And in that blessed coal-cellar ? Blimey ! I wouldn’t have gone in there to-night if I’d known.”

“ Do you mean to pretend that this is the first you’ve heard of Mr. Polesworth’s death ? ” Arnold asked sternly.

“ How should I know anything about it ? ” Joe replied. “ You said he was found on Thursday morning. Well, I started out from home before it was properly light, as I’ve just told you. And I haven’t spoken to any of the Middleden folk since.”

Arnold shook his head. “ It won’t do,” he said. “ We know too much to be put off with a pack of lies like that. On Wednesday night, after you left the hall, you thought you’d go to the school and steal some coal. When you got there you saw Mr. Polesworth go across the playground to the cellar. By the way, Mr. Polesworth owed you some money, didn’t he ? ”

“ I never saw him on Wednesday night,” Joe replied stubbornly. “ But it’s quite right about his owing me money. Thirty bob-for a job I did for him at The Spinney. And he cut up nasty about it and said he wasn’t going to

pay me. And now he's dead, I shan't ever see my money, I suppose."

Arnold nodded. "I see," he said. "It's perfectly clear what happened. Seeing Mr. Polesworth like that you thought you'd get your own back on him. So you waited until he got into the cellar, crept up behind him and hit him on the back of the head. You'd have done better if you had stopped at that instead of turning the gas on."

"I don't know what you mean," Joe insisted. "I keep on telling you that I never went near the coal-cellar on Wednesday night. And as for Mr. Polesworth, I didn't set eyes on him all day."

"Can you prove where you were between ten o'clock and midnight on Wednesday?"

"Maybe I can but maybe I'm not going to."

"That's your lookout. After you'd knocked Mr. Polesworth on the head you came out of the cellar and locked the padlock behind you. Then no doubt you went home and got into bed before your wife came back from the dance. It's no use, Masters. You'd far better be sensible and realise that the game's up. Do you feel inclined to make a full statement?"

Joe shook his head. "I've got nothing to say beyond what I've told you already," he replied.

"Well, perhaps you'll feel different about it in the morning," said Arnold.

He nodded to the sergeant on duty. "All right, take him away," he continued. "And when you've searched him bring me the shoes and anything else you find."

The search wasn't a very lengthy process. In a few minutes the sergeant returned with the Uskide-soled shoes and a miscellaneous variety of articles. A much-creased pound note and some loose change. A packet of cigarettes, half full, and a box of matches. A foot rule, and the short stub of a carpenter's pencil. A couple of dozen nails of various sizes and a handful of brads.

"Is that the lot?" Arnold asked.

"That's the lot, sir," the sergeant replied.

"All right then, we'll be getting back to Middleden. I'll be along in the morning in plenty of time before the court sits. Good-night."

It was well after midnight by the time that Arnold and Merriam got back to the Red Lion.

"What do we do next?" the latter asked. "Do you feel inclined to renew our nocturnal vigil?"

"No, I don't," Arnold replied emphatically. "There won't be any more trouble in this parish now."

"You think that Joe Masters is the man, then?"

"Why, of course he is. You don't doubt that, do you? Why, man alive, of course he's guilty. He says he never went near the cellar on Wednesday night, and yet he won't tell us where he did go. There's only one possible explanation of that. He couldn't think of any plausible alibi."

"Well, you may be right," said Merrion doubtfully. "But was it Joe who biffed young Acott on the head this evening? If so, what did he hit him with?"

"Why, one of the tools he had with him, of course. Depend upon it, he came back from his job at Wrigley much earlier than he says. We can very easily find that out by asking the landlord of the Bunch of Grapes."

"Yes, that's the easiest thing about it," said Merrion. "So Polesworth was right after all about the coal disappearing."

"Yes, but apparently he never suspected that Joe had provided himself with a set of keys for the purpose. I expect he's been going regularly to the cellar for a long time."

Merrion lighted a cigarette and began pacing thoughtfully up and down the room.

"That's just it," he said at last. "He's been visiting the cellar for a long time. Perhaps once a week or so. Can't you see him creeping in there without a sound, striking a match and filling his trug with lumps of coal? And all the time any one might have come along and caught him at it. It must have been a pretty jumpy business."

"That kind of theft always is a jumpy business, I imagine," Arnold remarked.

"Yes. I imagine Joe in such a state that he would have started out of his skin if a mouse had run across the floor. And as for any suggestion of spookiness, why it would have terrified him out of his wits."

"It would take a good deal to frighten Joe, I fancy," Arnold remarked.

"Don't you believe it. He'd be as timid as a hare if he thought there were ghosts about. I don't believe wild horses would have dragged him anywhere near that cellar to-night if he'd known that Polesworth had been found dead in it yesterday morning."

"Oh, that's ridiculous!" Arnold exclaimed. "Your imagination is ruining your reason, as usual. I suppose you'll say next that you believe Joe's story about his finding those shoes?"

Merrion took several further turns up and down the room before replying.

"There's something pretty queer about those shoes. They

aren't at all the sort of article that a man in Joe's position would buy. They're too light for heavy work and too expensive for luxury footwear. I wonder how exactly he did come by them?"

"He was wearing them on Wednesday evening, anyhow," said Arnold with conviction.

Merrion laughed suddenly. "You've changed your ground a bit, haven't you?" he said. "You've abandoned your theory of Polesworth having been the victim of a practical joker."

"I haven't abandoned it entirely, and I still think it's quite possible."

"It isn't, and you know it isn't. Who walked across the classroom floor and left his footprints clearly marked in the coke dust?"

"Polesworth himself, of course," Arnold replied. "I've been thinking about that. He must have got so much of the dust on his boots while he was stoking up the furnace that there was still some left even after he reached the school. Joe didn't make them, anyhow. He could have opened the coal-cellar door with his own key. But it's no use sitting up all night arguing about it. In my opinion, it's high time we went to bed."

Next morning, over an early breakfast, Arnold and Merrion discussed their plans for the day. It was arranged that Arnold should go into Buckley to give evidence when Joe appeared before the magistrate, and then come back to Middleden in time for the inquest which was to be held in the village hall at half-past twelve. Merrion, meanwhile, was to find his way to Wrigley and interview Mr. Carver, the landlord of the Bunch of Grapes.

"I shall hire a bicycle," said Merrion. "You see a lot more of the country when you're riding a bicycle than you do when you're driving a car. Besides, a good long bicycle ride will do me the world of good. I'll go and talk to Mr. Cadby. He'll know where I can get hold of a decent machine."

Mr. Cadby proved to be even more helpful than Merrion had expected. He had a nearly new bicycle of his own which he willingly placed at Merrion's disposal. And in addition, tucked away at the back of a drawer in the bar, he found a sheet of the one-inch Ordnance Survey covering the district.

Studying the map before he set out Merrion discovered that there were two routes from Middleden to Wrigley of approximately equal length. One of these led past the school and across the cross-roads, a mile and a half beyond them, and this Merrion determined to follow. He put the map in his pocket and started off. It was a fine day, cold and dry, and he found

the unwonted exercise not unpleasant. He timed himself to arrive at the Bunch of Grapes soon after half-past ten, which was opening time.

Wrigley turned out to be a village no bigger than Middleden, and he had no difficulty in finding his destination. He entered the bar, which at this time of day was empty, and rapped on the counter. A cheerful, ruddy-faced individual appeared in answer to this summons and Merrion ordered a pint of beer. The landlord drew it and Merrion encouraged his obvious inclination to talk.

Very gradually he worked up to the subject of Joe Masters. He talked about being on holiday at a place not very far away and how he had ridden over from there this morning.

"I wonder how far I've come?" he asked innocently.

"Well sir, where might you be staying exactly?" the landlord asked.

"A place called Middleden," Merrion replied. "You know where it is, I dare say?"

"Oh yes, I know well enough where it is, sir," the landlord replied. "You can't make it less than fourteen miles whichever way you go. Queer you should say you've come from Middleden, for I had a chap from there working for me only yesterday."

"Who was that?" Merrion asked. "I wonder if I happen to know him."

"His name is Joe Masters. I dare say you've come across him, sir. He's got no regular work but he does any odd jobs which come his way."

"Joe Masters!" Merrion exclaimed. "Why I've heard quite a lot about him this morning. From what I can make out he was caught in the act of stealing coal last night and the police took him to Buckley station."

"Well I never!" said the landlord. "So Joe's got himself into trouble at last, has he? Well, I'm not surprised. I've known Joe a good many years now, and I've always thought he wasn't to be trusted. I don't say that he isn't a very good man in his way, mind. Give him a job and he'll get it done and done properly if only you can make him stick to it. But if he sees anything lying around that he likes the look of, he'll have it, right enough. I kept my eyes pretty wide open while he was working here for me, I can tell you."

"Was he working for you long?" Merrion asked.

"Only a couple of days, sir. It was like this. One day last week I had business in Buckley and on my way back I came round through Middleden to see Joe. I told him that the roof of my pig-sty had fallen in, and asked him if he'd come round some time and put it right. You see, sir, there's nobody

in this village who knows rightly how to set about a job like that. And if I'd called in a regular builder he would have charged more than the old sty is worth."

Merrion nodded. "I know," he said. "It always pays to employ a jobbing man if he's any good at his work. Did you settle with Joe Masters when he was to come and do the work?"

"No, I didn't do that, sir. I told Joe what was wanted and that I wasn't in any great hurry for a day or two. He said he had a few little jobs on hand, and would come over when he'd finished them. And sure enough he turned up here before eight o'clock on Thursday morning."

"How long did he stay?"

"He finished the job yesterday evening. That was pretty good, considering that he was working single-handed. But then, mind you, I know Joe and I've found out the best way of handling him. I told him that as long as he was here I'd find him in grub and a shake-down for the night. But that I wouldn't sell him a drop of beer in the daytime, not until after dark. I knew that if he once got in here with a glass of beer in front of him he'd never start work again that day."

Merrion smiled. "Not a bad idea. He left here as soon as he had finished the job, I suppose?"

"No, he didn't do that. He finished about five o'clock yesterday and then I took him into the kitchen, paid him his money and gave him some tea. Then he waited till six o'clock, opening time, and came in here. I wasn't best pleased, for I thought he'd get too boozed to ride his bike home and I should be saddled with him for another night. It isn't that I grudged him the use of the loft, but, as I say, you've got to keep an eye on everything when Joe's about."

"It would have been better for Joe if he had stopped," Merrion remarked. "What time did he leave in the end?"

"It was just upon half-past eight. Joe had had a few pints by then but he seemed all right. I heard him telling one of the chaps in here that he'd got another job to do before he went to bed. There were a dozen or more of them in here when Joe left."

"Well, he's up before the Bench at Buckley this morning, they tell me. By the way, it was a queer thing about Mr. Polesworth being found dead like that. Did Joe Masters tell you anything about it?"

"Mr. Polesworth? The gentleman who lived in the house opposite the school? I knew him by sight, but I don't know that I've ever spoken to him. He was found dead, you say, sir? It's the first I've heard of it. Joe never said a word,

not to me at any rate. And Joe's one to talk right enough if you've got time to listen to him."

Merrion stayed for a few minutes longer, talking to the landlord, then started to ride back to Middleden. Joe's account of himself from Thursday morning onwards was fully confirmed. And one thing at least was certain. Joe had been at the Bunch of Grapes at the time of the affair of young Acott.

Merrion was still digesting this rather puzzling fact when he reached the cross-roads. He pedalled on for a short distance until he judged that he had reached the place where the incident had happened. Then he got off his bicycle and looked about him. There was, of course, no sign on the road of anything unusual having taken place. But on one side of the road was a shallow ditch in which were three or four inches of clear water.

Without any definite idea in his mind, Merrion walked for a few yards along the edge of this ditch. It contained a number of tin cans of every size and shape. But as he wandered along by the side of the ditch Merrion came to a sudden halt. He bent down and picked an object out of the water. It was a piece of lead piping about a foot long, and over it had been drawn several layers of india-rubber, apparently cut out of a disused bicycle tyre.

CHAPTER XI

By the time that Merrion got back to the Red Lion the inquest had already begun. He refreshed himself in the bar and then went upstairs to the sitting-room to await Arnold's arrival. The inspector duly appeared, looking particularly pleased with himself.

"Hallo, so you're back then," he said, on seeing Merrion. "Everything's going quite well."

"I'm glad of that," Merrion replied. "Tell me about Joe Masters first. What happened to him?"

"Remanded in custody pending a further charge being made against him. That affair didn't take more than a few minutes. I got back here in lots of time for the inquest."

"And what was the verdict?"

"There isn't one yet. Inquest adjourned for the police to make further inquiries. The coroner spotted the point that the cellar door was found locked on the outside and that Polesworth couldn't possibly have done that for himself. But he pointed out to the jury that the locking of the door

by itself was no evidence of foul play. I fancy he's come to much the same conclusion as I have. How have you got on?"

"Oh, I've had some very salutary exercise. I met Mr. Carver of the Bunch of Grapes and found him a very good fellow."

"And what did he tell you about Joe Masters?" Arnold asked.

"Quite a lot. To begin with, Joe got to Wrigley before eight o'clock on Thursday morning. That's rather significant, because it means that he must have been some little distance on his way before seven. You see the point? He couldn't have covered fourteen miles on his bicycle in the hour. Especially as there are two long and moderately steep hills on the way. In other words, he must have passed the school before Polesworth's body was found."

"Well, what if he did?" Arnold demanded impatiently. "We know that Polesworth had been dead for hours before then."

"It's a point of some importance, I think. The next thing is that Mr. Carver hadn't heard of Polesworth's death until I told him of it just now. The news then had not spread as far as Wrigley, for the landlord of the local pub would have been one of the first to hear it. So that Joe Masters would have heard nothing about Polesworth while he was working at the Bunch of Grapes."

"Finally we come to the most important fact, which is vouched for by Mr. Carver. Incidentally, there are about a dozen witnesses who would probably support him. Joe Masters didn't leave the Bunch of Grapes until about half-past eight yesterday evening. And it is absolutely certain that he was sitting in the bar there at the time that Acott was attacked. Now, what are you going to make of that?"

"I am not investigating a case of assault," replied Arnold shortly.

"I know you're not. But all the same I should have thought that you would have been interested to know who biffed young Acott on the head. It wasn't Joe Masters, obviously. He can clear himself of that particular charge easily enough."

"Yes, but he can't clear himself of the charge of locking the coal-cellar door. He declined to make any statement this morning, by the way. He can't or rather won't say where he was between ten o'clock and midnight on Wednesday. And of course, everything turns on that."

"Yes, I dare say it does," said Merrion. "Oh, by the way, I've got something to show you." With a dramatic gesture he drew the length of lead piping from under his coat,

brandished it in the air, and brought it down with a dull thud on the table in front of the inspector's eyes.

Arnold looked at it curiously. "What have you got there?" he asked.

"You'd better determine that for yourself," Merrion replied. "I found it in a ditch by the side of the road not far from the spot where Acott was attacked yesterday evening."

Arnold picked it up and examined it closely. "Nice handy tool to hit one over the head with," he said at last. "I can't imagine any other use for it, though. What made you look for it?"

Merrion chuckled. "My fertile imagination," he replied. "You must remember that by the time I was coming home, I knew that Acott's assailant could not be Joe Masters, whoever he was. Nor did it seem likely that the weapon had been a tool which someone happened to be carrying. It was far more likely that the assailant had deliberately equipped himself for the purpose."

"Now you know well enough that when a man has used a weapon with felonious intent his first instinct is to get rid of it. He doesn't want to be caught with it in his possession. According to Acott, his assailant jumped on to his bicycle as soon as he had hit him. Was it not at all events quite possible that he had chucked his weapon into the ditch as he rode away? So I just wandered along beside the ditch, hardly knowing what I was looking for, and that's what I found. And I agree with you that the only purpose it could serve is that of a bludgeon."

Arnold nodded. "What's all this rubber been wrapped round the pipe for?" he asked.

"Silence and efficiency. You could give a man a biff with that quite quietly and without running much risk of breaking a bone. On the other hand, if you hit him on the back of the head you'd almost certainly stun him."

"Acott wasn't hit on the back of the head," said Arnold stubbornly.

"No, but Polesworth was. It's no good, my friend. I know your charitable mind revolts at the idea that he was murdered. But I'm quite sure of it. He was deliberately locked into the cellar with the gas turned on after he'd first been stunned with that piece of piping."

"How far away from the cellar did you find the thing?" Arnold asked.

"Oh, at least a mile. When the murderer had finished with it on Wednesday evening, he put it back in his pocket, thinking that it would come in useful to clout young Dick Polesworth with."

"Oh, dash it all!" exclaimed Arnold. "How was he to know that he would have an opportunity of clouting Dick?"

"It is not unusual for sons to appear on the scene shortly after their parents have been murdered. This fellow, whoever he is, would have guessed that Dick would turn up as soon as he heard the news."

Arnold shook his head. "Sorry, but I'm not convinced," he replied. "You suggested yourself just now that the murderer's first instinct was to get rid of his weapon."

"Only if he thinks it likely to give him away. Polesworth died of gas poisoning. The weapon with which he was stunned doesn't come into the picture. In fact it was to be supposed that the contusion on the back of his head was caused by his tumbling on to the heap of coal. So there was no need to throw away a useful weapon until it had been used again. On the other hand, Acott's injuries had obviously been caused by something of this nature. So after the second application, it was sound common sense to get rid of it."

"And the same man used the weapon in both cases?" Arnold asked derisively.

"Obviously. It isn't likely that that thing is the property of the parish. It isn't handed out to any of the locals who happen to want to biff someone on the head. And we're both agreed that it was made for a definite purpose. And that's just why I don't believe that Joe Masters had any hand in the killing of Polesworth."

"And yet you helped to catch him in the act of pinching the coal last night," Arnold remarked.

"I know. But it's quite a long stretch from pinching coal to deliberate murder. Try to keep an open mind for a moment, and listen to my perfectly logical train of reasoning. The same man used this weapon in both cases. It wasn't Joe who biffed young Acott on the head because he was sitting in the bar at the Bunch of Grapes at the time. Therefore it wasn't Joe who knocked out Polesworth."

"But what if that bit of pipe had nothing to do with Polesworth's death?" Arnold demanded.

"Oh, but it must have!" Merriion exclaimed. "I know as surely as if I'd been there that Polesworth was clouted while he was seeing to the greenhouse furnace. I'm not going all over that ground again. And what was he clouted with if not a handy little tool like that?"

"I don't know," Arnold replied wearily. "It seems to me that you're doing your best to muddle the facts."

"I'm doing nothing of the kind. I'm trying to disentangle them. Now to begin with—why did the man on the bicycle biff the unoffending Acott on the side of the head?"

"Because he mistook him for Dick Polesworth. He had a grudge against him for some reason."

"Pretty curious grudge," said Merrion. "I think his object was something more than a mere slap on the face. It's my belief that he meant to repeat with the son the experiment which had been so successful with the father."

"Go on," said Arnold encouragingly. "Don't let any consideration of probability deter you."

"I am going on," Merrion replied. "My idea is this: the man on the bicycle had seen Acott leave The Spinney and, mistaking him for Dick Polesworth, awaited his return. He meant to stun him with that bit of pipe but somehow he missed his aim. He saw that his victim wasn't stunned but that he was, not unnaturally, on the alert. He wasn't going to risk another shot, for that would have meant a struggle. So, like a wise man, he rode off as fast as he could before he was recognised."

"And if he had succeeded in stunning his victim?" Arnold asked.

"In that case, I suppose he'd have found out before he went much further that he'd got the wrong man. But if it had been the right man and he had stunned him, the next item in the programme would have been to pick him up and deposit him in the ditch. There's quite a lot of water there in some places. Quite enough to drown an unconscious man in. Dick would have been found drowned and any bruises on his head would have been put down to his falling into the ditch. It would have been a slightly different version of Polesworth's murder."

"And the motive?" Arnold asked indulgently.

"I don't know. But it suggests a line of inquiry. Who was so bitterly incensed with the Polesworth family that they wished to destroy it, root and branch. Alternatively, who would benefit by the death of the two Polesworths?"

"I would rather start by asking who made that weapon of yours," Arnold replied.

Merrion shook his head. "You couldn't produce that piece of pipe in court as evidence," he said. "There's nothing to prove that it had any connection with the affair whatever. I picked it out of running water, so it's not the slightest use examining it for fingerprints, or hairs or anything like that. The most we can say is that it might have been used as a weapon."

"All the same, I'd like to know who made it," Arnold persisted.

"I don't suppose anybody but the man who used it can tell you that. He made it himself, and you may be quite

sure that he took care that nobody watched him doing it. Besides, there's nothing characteristic about it. Any one could pick up a piece of lead piping and a couple of old bicycle tyres."

"They're just the sort of thing that Joe Masters would have about him," said Arnold meaningly.

"Oh, confound Joe Masters!" Merrion exclaimed. "He's safe enough where he is, and you can afford to look round for some rational motive. I tell you there's someone out to slaughter both generations of Polesworths. And I don't suppose the little matter of mistaken identity will make him abandon his purpose. I mean that if I were Dick Polesworth, I'd keep my eyes pretty wide open."

"Well, he'll be under police protection so long as he's here. I saw the Superintendent while I was in Buckley this morning and he's arranged to send two fellows out here. They were to report to me this afternoon."

"That's good. I'm not inclined to spend my nights shivering behind that confounded hedge. But——"

However, at that moment the door opened and Mrs. Cadby appeared. "The vicar is here," she said. "He asked me if he could have a few minutes' conversation with the Inspector and I said I'd inquire."

"The vicar!" Arnold exclaimed. "What the dickens does he want, I wonder. All right, show him up, Mrs. Cadby."

A heavy step made the stairs creak and a few moments later the vicar appeared. He was a big man, tall, well set up and with a commanding presence. He paused in the doorway.

"I was not informed that you were engaged, Inspector," he said in a deep voice.

"Oh, that's all right, Mr.—er——" said Arnold.

"My name is Jennings," said the vicar impressively, finishing his sentence for him. "I will return when you have completed your business with this gentleman."

"No, don't go away, Mr. Jennings," Arnold replied hastily. "This is Mr. Merrion, a friend of mine. He's helping me in my investigations. You can say anything you like in front of him. Do sit down, won't you?"

The vicar lowered himself into a chair, not without dignity. "I am very glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Merrion," he said. "And now, Inspector, I wish to consult you officially about one of my parishioners".

Arnold inclined his head. "Any advice that I can give you is entirely at your service," he said.

"I am greatly obliged to you. I refer, of course, to Joseph Masters, one of the leading members of my choir. His wife

has just been to see me in great distress. Green, our local constable, told her that he has been arrested on a charge of stealing coal from the school and that he is now in gaol. Naturally, I am most anxious to do anything in my power to secure his release."

"Technically, he is not in gaol, Mr. Jennings," said Arnold. "The magistrate remanded him in custody in expectation that further charges will be brought against him."

"Further charges!" the vicar exclaimed. "And what may be the nature of those charges?"

"I would rather not answer that question at this stage," Arnold replied. "There is, unfortunately, no doubt as to the fact of the coal. Mr. Merrion and I caught him in the act about half-past ten last night."

The vicar frowned. "This is very perplexing," he said. "I am aware that Mr. Polesworth, whose unexpected death we all bitterly regret, believed that coal was being stolen from the school. But, I may tell you in confidence, it was suspected that the culprit was an entirely different person. In fact, so certain was Mr. Polesworth that his suspicions were correct that he had taken definite steps in the matter before his death."

"So I understand," said Arnold. "He believed that Miss Bowring was the culprit."

"You appear to be remarkably well-informed, Inspector. Perhaps you are not aware that he had communicated his suspicions to the Director of Education of the Claytonshire Education Committee?"

Arnold thought it best not to betray Mr. Wenlock's confidence. "That, surely, was rather a drastic proceeding?" he asked.

"Well, perhaps it was, although I admit that I was ready to countenance his action. Miss Bowring's conduct has been so unsatisfactory in other respects that I was prepared to believe in her guilt on this occasion."

"May I ask in what respect her conduct has been unsatisfactory, Mr. Jennings?"

The vicar hesitated. "It is not the easiest thing for me to explain, Inspector," he said. "Miss Bowring has not always shown a proper appreciation of her position. You will agree with me when I say that the head teacher of a school should, by her behaviour, show an example to the younger generation."

Arnold caught a furtive wink from Merrion. "Yes, most certainly I agree with you there, Mr. Jennings," he said.

"Well, Miss Bowring's behaviour has not been all that I could have wished. I have no complaints of her ability

as a teacher, only last month the Diocesan Inspector made a most favourable report upon the religious instruction carried out at the school. But in her private life she has shown a disregard of propriety which I can only deplore."

"In what way, Mr. Jennings?" Arnold asked, carefully avoiding meeting Merrion's eye.

"I will tell you. I have the facts from Mrs. Tamplin, one of the school managers. She is a most straightforward woman, and one who would never descend to the slightest infraction of the truth. It began when Mr. Wenlock was acting as correspondent of the school. You are aware, I suppose, that it is necessary for the correspondent and the head teacher to keep in close touch?"

Arnold nodded. "Yes, that's been explained to me," he said.

"Then I need not elaborate the point. But the necessary touch can be maintained without outraging the proprieties. The head teacher can ask the correspondent to visit her at the school, and their interview can take place in the presence of the children or of an assisting teacher."

Arnold wondered what on earth the vicar was driving at.

"Yes, that would be easy enough," he said, vaguely.

"Miss Bowring's association with Mr. Wenlock was not limited to such interviews. Mrs. Tamplin came to me one day in great distress. She told me that on the previous Saturday Mr. Wenlock had called at the school house for Miss Bowring in his car. He had driven her into Buckley, where they spent the afternoon watching a cricket match."

"There does not seem any very great harm in that," Arnold remarked.

"I do not think you fully understand the position," the vicar replied reproachfully. "You must understand that Mr. Wenlock is a married man with a very charming wife and children, while Miss Bowring is a single woman. You cannot approve of their spending the afternoon together openly in that way. I should be very loath to put any evil constructions upon their behaviour, but it is bound to give rise to the most unpleasant conjectures."

"Did you take any steps in the matter, Mr. Jennings?" Arnold asked.

"Of course. It was doubly my duty to do so, both as vicar of the parish and as chairman of the body of managers. I spoke very seriously both to Miss Bowring and to Mr. Wenlock."

"Then you're an interfering old man," Arnold thought. But his voice remained as polite as ever. "Did your remonstrance have any effect, Mr. Jennings?" he asked.

"I trust so, although my advice was not received in the spirit in which it was offered. In fact, Mr. Wenlock appeared to resent it bitterly. He used an expression about Mrs. Tampling which I would not care to repeat, and on the following day he sent in his resignation to the managers as correspondent of the school. I had considerable difficulty in persuading Mr. Polesworth to take his place."

"And Miss Bowring?" Arnold asked. "What attitude did she take?"

"Miss Bowring is a very difficult woman, very difficult indeed. She produced the code of the Board of Education and pointed out to me an article therein contained. This article provides that teachers shall not be required to abstain, outside school hours, from any occupations which do not interfere with the due performance of their duty. And she maintained that this definition covered the watching of a cricket match. She listened to what I had to say respectfully enough, I must admit. But from that day to this she has not attended a service at my church. She has, I am given to understand, bicycled two miles to the adjoining parish in order to perform her religious duties."

"Has she associated with Mr. Wenlock since then?"

"I regret to say that I have every reason for believing that she has. Again Mrs. Tamplin is my informant. She is very assiduous in visiting the poorer members of the congregation and, in consequence, she hears much that does not come under my direct observation. She tells me that Miss Bowring is still in the habit of going out alone with Mr. Wenlock in his car. I am glad to say, however, that he no longer calls for her at the school house."

Arnold smiled, then suddenly changed the subject. "I understand that you are anxious to do what you can for Masters, Mr. Jennings," he said.

"I consider it my duty to assist, to the best of my ability, to assist any of my parishioners who may find themselves in trouble," the vicar replied.

"There is only one way of helping him," Arnold said. "What I am about to tell you is, of course, in the strictest confidence. There is reason to believe that Masters may have been in the neighbourhood when Mr. Polesworth was locked in the coal-cellar. He refuses to say where he was between ten o'clock and mid-night on Wednesday. Until that matter is cleared up, we are bound to regard him with deep suspicion."

"The allegation you suggest is a very serious one," said the vicar solemnly.

"It is," Arnold agreed. "But if Master is innocent of any complicity in the death of Mr. Polesworth, he can very

easily clear himself. He has only to tell us where he went after he left the hall on Wednesday evening. Now you understand how you can best help him, Mr. Jennings. During the period of his remand you are entitled to visit him. If you could persuade him to make a truthful statement it would be greatly to his benefit."

"I am very grateful to you for the suggestion, Inspector," the vicar replied. "I will certainly do my best. Masters, although an excellent workman, is apt to succumb to temptation."

"He cannot resist the temptation to appropriate other people's property, I understand," said Arnold.

"I fear that is the case. He is also, I regret to say, addicted to intemperance." The vicar rose majestically from his chair. "I will detain you no longer, gentlemen," he said. "I will visit my unfortunate parishioner in his place of detention at the earliest opportunity."

Arnold saw the vicar off the premises and then returned to the sitting-room.

"Well, of all the hypocritical old humbugs!" he exclaimed.

But Merrion merely shrugged his shoulders. "He isn't really," he replied. "It's only that he looks at things from an entirely different point of view from ours. And that's quite natural. The most important point that emerges from all that gossip is that Miss Bowring and Mr. Wenlock seem to be on particularly friendly terms. You recall Wenlock's indignation when Polesworth sent him a copy of his particularly fatuous letter to the Education Committee. You haven't taken any steps to check his alibi for Wednesday evening, have you?"

"No, I haven't," Arnold replied forcibly.

"Well, I should if I were you. It seems that both Miss Bowring and Wenlock had a definite grievance against Polesworth. But neither of these grievances were sufficiently serious to furnish a motive for murder. I feel almost inclined to come round to your practical joker idea, in spite of the evidence of my senses."

"If you have, you will see that the practical joker must have been Joe Masters."

But Merrion shook his head. "The critical period was from ten to midnight on Wednesday. At this time Miss Bowring was sitting alone in her room at the school house. Wenlock, rather oddly, was doing business. He had gone out in his car to visit an unidentified farmer. Joe Masters refuses to say where he was. And don't forget that most convenient late train from Buckley to London."

"What has the train got to do with it?" Arnold demanded.

"Nothing at all, most probably. But its existence would have made it possible for any one who knew his way about this part of the country to clear out to London after he had locked Polesworth into the cellar. A point worth bearing in mind."

Arnold shrugged his shoulders. "If the vicar persuades Joe Masters to unburden his conscience the problem will be solved," he replied. "Now, I must see those two chaps the Superintendent is sending out and give them their instructions."

CHAPTER XII

AFTER Arnold's departure Merrion sat for a long time wrapped in thought. Then, acting on a sudden impulse, he jumped up and put on his hat and coat. It was just after three o'clock, quite a reasonable hour for a friendly call. He left the Red Lion, walked rapidly to the school and rang Miss Bowring's bell.

After an interval, the head teacher appeared and looked at Merrion curiously.

"You were with the Inspector yesterday, weren't you?" she asked. "Did you want to see me?"

"Not if you're expecting any other visitors, Miss Bowring," Merrion replied politely.

"No, I'm not expecting anybody," she replied a trifle sharply. "Miss Henniker has gone into Buckley for the afternoon and I'm alone. Would you care to come in?"

Merrion accepted the not very cordial invitation. "Thanks very much, Miss Bowring, I'd love to," he replied eagerly. "I'm all alone this afternoon, too. And I don't see why we shouldn't keep one another company, in spite of what the vicar might say. My name is Merrion, by the way."

She hesitated for a moment and then her eyes twinkled with amusement. "Come in, Mr. Merrion," she said heartily. "Sit down in that chair by the fire over there and tell me exactly what the vicar's been saying about me."

"I should hate to do that," said Merrion as he sat down in the chair pointed out to him. "You smoke, of course, like all sensible people? Try one of these. They're not half bad. That's right. I'll light it for you."

She sat for a moment puffing at her cigarette and regarding her visitor intently. "Why have you come to see me this afternoon, Mr. Merrion?" she asked directly.

"Because, even after what the vicar said, I wanted to make your acquaintance."

"Out of morbid curiosity, I suppose. I'm sure that the vicar depicted me as a loose woman. I hope you won't be terribly disappointed when I tell you that I'm not."

"I'll take your word for it, Miss Bowring. And in return I'll tell you that I'm not a policeman, although I do drag round with my friend, Inspector Arnold. I'm what is known as a retired gentleman. Something like Mr. Polesworth, in fact."

She made a gesture of distaste. "I hope not," she replied. "Oh, I suppose I ought not to say that sort of thing now that he's dead. But I can't forgive him even now for the trick he played on me."

Merrion smiled. "I'm going to tell you something else about myself," he said. "As I tell you, I'm a retired gentleman, and I live in a village in the eastern counties about the size of this. And some years ago I allowed myself to be persuaded to join the body of managers of my local school."

Miss Bowring looked at him pityingly. "I'm not sure that school managers aren't worse than policemen," she remarked.

"They are, undoubtedly. Policemen don't turn round and bite unless you deliberately provoke them. But what I was going to tell you is that our school correspondent is a woman, and that she and the head teacher are always at one another's throats. They spend hours trying to make things as difficult for one another as they can. Tell me, does it always happen?"

"Does what always happen?" she asked evenly.

"Why, that correspondents and head teachers get on one another's nerves?"

Miss Bowring laughed. "They're apt to, if either of them is deficient in tact, I'll admit," she replied. "But with a little give and take there's no reason why they shouldn't get on together quite well. I never had any unpleasantness while Mr. Wenlock was correspondent. It was only after Mr. Polesworth took over that things became difficult."

"You couldn't manage to get on with Mr. Polesworth?" Merrion suggested.

"Get on with him! Nobody in the village could do that, however hard they tried. I did my best, but I couldn't do anything right where he was concerned. And as for his last effort, I'm still so furious that I hardly dare trust myself to talk about it."

"You mean his request to the Education Committee for sanction for your dismissal?"

She stared at him in amazement. "How ever did you hear of that?" she asked. "The vicar told you, I suppose."

"No, the vicar didn't tell me, but I know all about it. But I'm rather surprised you should know of the letter he wrote. Did he tell you about it himself?"

"Not he. He wouldn't have dared to say such a thing to my face. One of my friends told me."

Merrion threw the end of his cigarette into the fire. "Mr. Wenlock, perhaps?" he asked innocently.

"If you'll forgive me saying so, Mr. Merrion, I don't see that it's any business of yours," she replied tartly.

"It isn't," Merrion agreed. "But it seems to me that it's rather vitally your business, Miss Bowring. Don't you see? Somebody locked the coal-cellar while Mr. Polesworth was in it. And that somebody is directly responsible for his death."

"What do you mean?" she demanded angrily. "Are you suggesting——?"

"My dear lady, I'm suggesting nothing," Merrion interrupted her. "I know as well as you do that you had nothing to do with Mr. Polesworth's death. But don't you see that as far as you're concerned the facts are just a trifle awkward? You had a very bitter grudge against Mr. Polesworth. You were sitting alone in this room when that door, which is only a few yards away from here, was locked. I can imagine inquisitive people, like my friend Arnold, for instance, asking themselves all sorts of questions."

"They can keep on asking, for all I care."

Merrion shook his head. "Injured innocence is all very well, but it doesn't carry conviction," he said. "At least not half so efficiently as facts which can be proved. Now, I am going to ask you a question which you needn't answer unless you want to. When did you hear that Mr. Polesworth had written that letter to the Education Committee?"

She hesitated for a long time. "On Wednesday evening, soon after nine o'clock. There, now."

"I see," said Merrion quietly. "I wonder how you came to hear of it? Mr. Polesworth didn't tell you, I suppose?"

"He'd have heard something if he had," Miss Bowring replied. "No, he didn't tell me. It was—it was one of the managers."

Merrion allowed no sign of his satisfaction to escape him. "Mr. Wenlock, perhaps?" he suggested.

"Quite right," she replied. "He came to see me on Wednesday evening and told me all about it. And naturally, I was furious and asked him what I had better do about it. I wanted to go across the road straight away and have it out with Mr. Polesworth. But Oswald—Mr. Wenlock, I mean—wouldn't let me."

Merrion appeared not to notice her slip. "What did he

recommend you to do?" he asked.

"Nothing for the present. He said that if I gave Mr. Polesworth a long rope, he'd be bound to hang himself. I was quite safe, for the committee wouldn't take any action unless they had definite proof that I had been stealing the coal. Of course, Mr. Wenlock knew that I'd never even thought of such a thing. Then it would be my turn later to take proceedings against Mr. Polesworth for defamation of character."

Merrion nodded. "Pretty good advice, I should think," he said, "You know that you're vindicated, don't you?"

"Vindicated!" she exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

"Why, in the matter of stealing the coal. Joe Masters was caught red-handed in the cellar last night."

"Oh, that! Yes, the Inspector told me when I saw him at the inquest. I always suspected that Joe might be the culprit. He can never resist picking up anything that's within his reach. Unless, of course, he thinks that a trap is being set for him. You heard what happened when he was working for Mr. Polesworth?"

"I've heard that he did a job for him, but that Mr. Polesworth found fault with the work and wouldn't pay."

Miss Bowring shook her head. "I don't think you can have heard the whole story," she said. "I don't suppose there was anything wrong with Joe's work, for whenever he took a job on he did it properly. Joe told me that he and Mr. Polesworth fell out over half a crown."

"How did that happen?" Merrion asked.

"Well, this is Joe's account of the affair. It seems that Mr. Polesworth sent for him to do something in the bathroom. When Joe got into the room the first thing he saw was a half-crown lying on the floor.

"Now, Joe had had that trick played on him before. It seems that some people always leave a coin about when workmen are coming to the house. Just by way of testing their honesty. If the workman reports the discovery of the coin, all is well. If he doesn't it's a sign that he wants watching."

"Yes, I've heard of that being done," said Merrion. "And a pretty low-down trick it is, in my opinion."

"That's just what Joe thought. He knew perfectly well that Mr. Polesworth had put the coin down to see how far Joe was to be trusted. So he thought he'd go one better. He drilled a hole right through the middle of the coin and then nailed it to the floor. He didn't say anything about it and went on quietly and finished his work.

"As he was leaving the house, Mr. Polesworth intercepted him, said he'd dropped half a crown, and asked Joe if he'd seen

one lying about anywhere. Joe quite politely replied that he'd seen one lying on the bathroom floor. Mr. Polesworth asked him what he had done with it, and Joe said that he had taken care that it wouldn't roll anywhere out of sight. They went up to the bathroom together and Joe pointed out the coin still lying in the place where he had found it.

"Naturally, Mr. Polesworth bent down to pick it up, but, being a short-sighted man, he didn't see it was nailed to the floor. Joe told me that he had a good laugh watching him. Of course, when Mr. Polesworth found out what Joe had done, he was furious. He said that he'd spoilt a perfectly good half-crown and would have to give him another in its place. Joe told him that he'd see him somewhere first, and that's how they parted."

"I entirely sympathise with Joe," said Merrion. "But we were talking about Mr. Wenlock's visit to you on Wednesday evening. What time did he come?"

"I really don't know exactly, but it was about an hour after Miss Henniker had gone out to the whist drive. Between half-past eight and nine, I should think."

"And how long did he stay?"

"Really, Mr. Merrion, you're very inquisitive. Does it matter to anybody how long he stayed?"

"I think it matters quite a lot to you, Miss Bowring," Merrion replied. "You told the Inspector that you were alone in this room all the evening, you know."

"Is it any business of the Inspector's what visitors I may happen to have?" she asked dangerously.

"Certainly not, in the ordinary course of events. But I wish I could make you see reason."

"I am perfectly capable of distinguishing reason from impertinence, Mr. Merrion."

"I'd get that idea out of my head if I were you. I'm not trying to pry into your private affairs—they don't interest me sufficiently for that."

"Well, that's plain speaking, anyhow," she said, a trifle mollified. "What are you trying to find out?"

"I'm trying to find out who locked the cellar door on Wednesday night when Mr. Polesworth was inside."

"If I'd known that he was inside, I'd have locked the door and left him there all night," she replied. "I was feeling just like that. But I didn't know, so there you are."

"Can you prove that you didn't?" Merrion asked. "If you were alone in the room all the evening, of course you can't. Now do you see?"

"Oh, yes, I see. Having been suspected of stealing coal, I am naturally put down as a hardened criminal. It's not

a very long step from theft to murder, I suppose. But I can assure you that I never so much as set eyes on Mr. Polesworth on Wednesday evening."

"In spite of the false statement you made to the Inspector?" Merrion asked.

"Oh, that!" she exclaimed wearily. "It was silly of me, perhaps. But what else could I have done? I didn't want every one to know that Mr. Wenlock had spent the whole evening here. You've no idea how people talk if they get to know a thing like that."

"Did Mr. Wenlock spend the whole evening here?" Merrion asked swiftly.

"Why don't you ask Mr. Wenlock himself?" she countered hotly.

"The Inspector did," Merrion replied. "Mr. Wenlock told him that he had taken out his car soon after dinner, driven some miles to see a farmer with whom he had business, and got back to Middleden just as the people were coming away from the dance. You see, your stories don't exactly tally, do they?"

Miss Bowring frowned. "I could have thought of a better yarn than that," she said. "Well, I don't care who knows the truth, for there's not a bit of harm in it. Mr. Wenlock stayed here all the evening and didn't leave until just before midnight."

"And neither of you left this room the whole time he was here?"

"He didn't, anyhow. I went into the kitchen at half-past ten to make some coffee."

"How long were you there?"

"How can I possibly tell? How long does it take, to put a kettle on the gas and make a pot of coffee? Ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, perhaps."

"And Mr. Wenlock didn't leave this room while you were in the kitchen?"

"He may have done. I didn't ask him. But if he had locked Mr. Polesworth in the cellar he'd have told me about it, I'm sure. He would have known how the idea would have delighted me. And now you're satisfied, I hope?"

Merrion evaded this question. "Where did Mr. Wenlock leave his car while he was here?" he asked.

"Not outside the door, you may be sure of that. He didn't want people talking any more than I did. There's a shed belonging to him just up the road. I expect he left it there—he usually does when he comes to see me."

Merrion stroked his chin reflectively. "I wish you'd told the Inspector all this in the first place," he said.

"Well, you'll tell him for me now, I suppose?" she replied.

"I shall do nothing of the kind. He would only get the impression that I bullied the story out of you. I shall tell him that you want to see him and leave the rest to you. By the way, I suppose it's quite certain that Mr. Polesworth did actually send that letter to the Education Committee?"

"Oh, there's no doubt about that. I heard from them to-day by the afternoon post. In consequence of certain allegations made by the school correspondent, the district secretary wishes to see me in his office at Buckley after school hours on Monday. He'll ask me for my version of the affair, and I shall tell him. Oh, yes, and there's another letter from the committee which I am asked to bring to the attention of the managers."

"What's that about?" Merrion asked.

"I'll show it to you, if you like." She went to a drawer and, after some rummaging, produced a sheet of paper which she handed to Merrion. It was a typewritten letter on the Claytonshire Education Committee's official stationery.

"DEAR MADAM,—The Committee have learnt with regret of the sudden death of the school correspondent. As the Committee understands that this fatality was due to an escape of gas, we would ask you to draw the attention of the Managers to paragraph 72A of the Regulations.

"I am, dear Madam,

"Yours faithfully,

"THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION."

Merrion handed back the letter. "What are the provisions of paragraph 72A of the regulations?" he asked.

"I can tell you that without looking it up," she replied. "It provides that the managers must pay for any gas consumed when the school is not being used for purposes of education. And the vicar simply hates parting with a halfpenny."

"Well, he can't expect the committee to pay for gas used for the purpose of killing his correspondent," said Merrion. "It would be almost as reasonable to expect them to pay for his funeral. Well, Miss Bowring, I'm going along now to look for the Inspector. As soon as I find him I shall send him along here to talk to you. That will be all right, won't it?"

"I suppose so," she replied. "What the village will think of my having two gentlemen visitors in one afternoon, I don't know. But send him along by all means. I promise to be duly patient."

Merrion on his return to the Red Lion found Arnold waiting for him,

"Hallo, there you are!" the inspector exclaimed. "Whatever have you been doing all this time?"

"I've been trying to draw truth from the bottom of a rather shallow well," Merrion replied. "But we'll talk about that later. Miss Bowring wants to see you, and if you take my advice you'll call on her before she changes her mind. She's at home now, or she was a few minutes ago."

"What does she want to see me about?" Arnold asked suspiciously.

"That I'll leave you to find out for yourself. Now, run along to teacher like a good boy. You'll find me here when you come back."

The inspector was away for nearly an hour. He came back, flung his hat savagely on the table and stared accusingly at Merrion. "How did you know she was lying?" he demanded.

"I didn't," Merrion replied. "But somehow after what we heard about her and Wenlock I began to have my doubts. Wenlock's story never struck me as particularly convincing. One doesn't start out to do business with farmers at eight o'clock in the evening."

"I went to see Wenlock after I had left her," Arnold growled. "I put it up to him that according to Miss Bowring he had made a false statement. After a bit he admitted this quite cheerfully. The only reason he'd made up the farmer story was because he didn't want Miss Bowring talked about."

"Did Miss Bowring tell you that she left Wenlock alone in the sitting-room while she went into the kitchen about half-past ten to make some coffee?"

"Yes, she told me that. I asked Wenlock about it, and he told exactly the same story. And he swears that he didn't leave the sitting-room for an instant while she was in the kitchen. But, then, they're such manifest liars that I'm blest if I know what to believe."

"It is a bit difficult," Merrion agreed. "It seems quite probable that Wenlock did spend Wednesday evening with Miss Bowring, for it isn't likely that they would have concocted the story between them. The question is, what mischief did they get up to round about half-past ten? You'll admit now that there are other runners besides Joe Masters?"

"Yes, confound you, I do. From what I could make out, both Miss Bowring and Wenlock were pretty peeved with Polesworth because of that ridiculous letter of his to the Education Committee."

"They were probably chewing over their grievances when they heard him unlock the iron gate. One of them went out to see what it was, came back and reported that Polesworth had gone into the cellar. They saw how they could get their

own back on him, and one of them crept up and locked the door. So, you see, my original theory turns out to be right after all."

Merrion shook his head. "It didn't happen like that," he replied. "Polesworth was knocked out while he was pottering about his greenhouse furnace, I'm sure of that."

"But, man alive, can't you see that's ridiculous?" Arnold exclaimed. "It involves the theory that Polesworth was deliberately murdered. And I refuse to believe that people in the position of Mr. Wenlock and Miss Bowring would murder a man merely because of a silly insult."

"Well, I don't know," Merrion said doubtfully. "People have been known to commit murder on the slightest provocation. Are you suggesting that school teachers and estate agents are in a plane above the ordinary run of human beings?"

"No, I'm not. But it ought to be obvious even to you that they are far more likely to have planned a practical joke than a deliberate murder. It would learn Polesworth, to spend a night in the cellar. That's the way they looked at it, you may be sure."

Merrion smiled. "And who turned on the gas?" he asked.

"Why, Polesworth himself, of course. Finding himself locked in, his natural instinct was to get a light on the scene."

Merrion sighed. "An army mule is a docile and complacent beast compared with you," he said. "What was the good of Polesworth turning on the gas when he hadn't got a match to light it with? On the other hand, he had an electric torch which would have given him all the light he wanted."

Arnold filled his pipe, ramming down the tobacco irritably with his finger. "I may be stubborn, but you're as changeable as a weather-cock," he said. "First of all you say it isn't Joe Masters, then you turn round and say it wasn't either of these other two. What do you mean?"

"I haven't said that it wasn't either of the other two," Merrion replied. "I merely maintain that things didn't happen as you suppose. But I can imagine a series of events which does not involve deliberate murder."

"Imagine!" Arnold exclaimed. "I bet you can. Well, go ahead."

"Here you are, then. You've got to imagine Miss Bowring and Wenlock holding an indignation meeting about Polesworth's letter. They try and think of some means of making his life a burden to him, and one of them has a bright idea. Pretty well everybody in the village must have known that Polesworth was in the habit of going out to see to his precious orchids before he went to bed. The bright idea was that they should lie in wait for him and give him the fright of his life.

"You have noticed that from the schoolhouse porch you can see the front door of The Spinney. They watched until they saw Polesworth come out, and they followed him down to the greenhouse. By the time they got there he was bending over the furnace, and Wenlock, just by way of paying off old scores, clouted him on the head."

Arnold started to make an objection, but Merrion silenced him with a gesture.

"Let me finish," he said, "Wenlock hit out harder than he meant to and Polesworth collapsed in an unconscious heap. Then, of course, there was a proper panic. They thought they'd done him in, and not unnaturally were in the deuce of a stew about it. And one of them, remembering the fuss about the stolen coal, had the second bright idea of the evening. They picked him up, carried him across to the cellar, turned on the gas and locked him in. The idea being that people like Inspector Arnold would think he had been the victim of a practical joke."

Arnold knocked his pipe violently on the fender. "Confound you, you made me pack my tobacco much too tightly just now," he said. "There's just one question I should like to ask you. What did Wenlock hit Polesworth with?"

"Oh, I don't know," Merrion replied cheerfully. "Something that came handy to him, I suppose. Perhaps he took one of the rulers from the school over with him."

"Then where does your bit of piping come in?" Arnold demanded. "It's no good telling me that Wenlock happened to find a thing like that lying about. If he brought it with him it means that he meant all along to lay Polesworth out. The only other alternative is that it had nothing to do with the affair."

"Yes, that's a bit of a teaser, certainly," Merrion agreed. "And I've got another one. If Miss Bowring and Wenlock between them contrived Polesworth's death, who swiped young Acott on the head the other evening? Did either of them carry their rancour so far as to visit the sins of the father upon the children? It was carrying things a bit far, for young Dick Polesworth had nothing whatever to do with her letter."

"That's ridiculous, of course," Arnold replied. "We've been too hasty in jumping to conclusions. It doesn't really follow that the attack on young Acott had anything to do with Polesworth's death."

"Then this apparently peaceful village must be populated by potential homicides," Merrion remarked.

"Oh, nonsense! Acott wasn't very badly damaged, after all. Someone who had a grudge against Dick Polesworth saw Acott, mistook him for him and thought he'd biff him one. That's all."

"Well, we shall see," said Merrion. "You've issued the necessary orders to your stout policemen, I suppose?"

"The Spinney will be under close observation all the time that Dick Polesworth is in it. We shan't have any more of these mysterious outrages, you may bet your last shilling on that."

CHAPTER XIII

JUST before nine o'clock that evening Merrion got up from his chair, stretched himself and strolled across to the window. He drew aside a corner of the curtain and looked out.

"What instructions did you give those two policemen of yours?" he asked.

He and Arnold had been discussing the case after supper, and by now the inspector was feeling distinctly sleepy. "What do you suppose?" he replied. "I told them to take it in turns to patrol the road in front of The Spinney and to relieve one another every eight hours."

"Well, I'm glad that I'm not the one that's on duty now," said Merrion. "It's absolutely pitch dark and raining steadily. We're a lot better off in this cosy room, I fancy."

Arnold grunted. "It may be all right for you, but I shall have to go out and see that the fellow's doing his job properly. You never know with these country chaps. They mean well enough, but they aren't always over-intelligent."

Merrion drew the curtain back into place, lighted a cigarette and sat down again with a contented sigh.

"Do you know, I'm beginning to wonder," he said. "Suppose, now—— Hallo, what's that?"

Someone hurried up the stairs, reached the door of the sitting-room and burst in. It was Mrs. Cadby, very much flurried and out of breath.

"Oh, sir, young Mr. Polesworth's been hurt!" she exclaimed. "His friend who's staying with him just looked in to ask me to tell you. He's gone on to fetch Dr. Stowe."

Arnold sprang to his feet. "Hell!" he exclaimed. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Cadby. All right, we'll be along at once. Come on, Merrion."

They paused only to put on their hats and coats, then left the Red Lion and hurried to the Spinney. The front door was shut, but Arnold hammered upon it loudly. It was opened by a constable in uniform, who saluted on recognising the inspector.

"Hallo, Tripp, what's all this?" Arnold demanded.

"Young Mr. Polesworth has been assaulted, sir," the constable replied stolidly.

"Isn't that just what you were sent here to prevent? Is he badly hurt?"

"I hope not, sir, but he's been knocked out. We carried him into the sitting-room, sir, if you'd like to see him."

"Of course I want to see him," Arnold replied testily. Disregarding Merriam and the constable, he strode across the hall and through the doorway. A curious scene greeted him. Dick Polesworth, wearing a raincoat and gum-boots, was lying on the sofa. Mrs. Repton, wild-eyed and trembling, was holding a pudding-basinful of water in one hand, while with the other she dabbed Dick's head with a sponge.

Arnold picked up the wrist that was hanging down over the edge of the sofa and held it for a moment. "He's alive, anyhow," he muttered. Then, turning to Tripp, who had followed him to the door: "How did this happen?" he demanded.

Tripp cleared his throat. "I was patrolling the road in front of the house as you instructed me, sir," he replied. "I was near the end of my beat, about fifty yards from the house, when I saw the front door open."

"You saw the front door open!" Arnold exclaimed. "What do you mean? It's far too dark to see anything out of doors to-night."

"Well, sir, I didn't exactly see the front door open. But I saw a light shining from inside the house where the front door was, and I knew that someone must have opened it. I heard voices, and then I saw a light, which might be a lantern, going down the garden path."

"What did you do then?"

"I walked back to the gate, opened it and went to the front door. I saw the other gentleman standing there, and asked him if everything was all right. He said it was, and that he was waiting for Mr. Polesworth who had gone down to the greenhouse to stoke up the furnace. We stood there talking for a couple of minutes, it might be, and then the other gentleman said that Mr. Polesworth was taking a long time over the job. I don't know that those were his exact words, sir, but it was something like that."

"The other gentleman's name is Mr. Acott. Where exactly were you standing?"

"Just inside the porch out of the rain, sir."

"Did you see or hear anything of Mr. Polesworth while you were there?"

"Nothing at all, sir. The light from the door shone a little way down the path, but not so far as the greenhouse."

"Well, what happened next?"

"Mr. Acott and I talked for another minute or two, and then we said that Mr. Polesworth was taking a long time to put two or three shovels full of coke on the fire. I suggested that we might go down and see if he wanted any help, and Mr. Acott said that he'd got the only lantern in the house with him. I said it didn't matter, as I'd got my torch. I turned it on and we went down to the greenhouse together, sir."

"What did you find when you got there?" Arnold asked.

"Well, sir, we went down the path, and as soon as we turned the corner we saw a light in the furnace shed. It was a hurricane lantern stood on the ground. Mr. Polesworth was lying doubled up in front of the furnace. Mr. Acott called out to him, but he didn't answer. So we pulled him out of the pit between us and found that he was unconscious. We carried him up to the house, laid him on the sofa and called the housekeeper to attend to him, sir."

"You looked him over, I suppose. Any signs of injury?"

"None that I could see, sir. But his cap had fallen off just as if he'd been knocked on the head. I've left it alone for you to see, sir."

"That's sensible enough. What did you do after you got Mr. Polesworth on to the sofa?"

"I thought it best to stay and watch the house, sir. So I asked Mr. Acott if he'd go and fetch the doctor and give you a message on his way."

Arnold was about to put some further question when he heard the sound of a car pulling up outside. "That'll be the doctor, I expect," he said. "Better go and let him in, Tripp."

The constable left the room, and Arnold turned to Merrion, who was standing quietly by his side. "What's the meaning of this?" he asked.

"I don't know," Merrion replied. "But you won't mind if I point out that Joe Masters is safely locked in Buckley Gaol? Hush, here comes the doctor."

Dr. Stowe came in, nodded briskly to Merrion and the inspector and sat down in a chair beside the unconscious man.

"Mr. Acott told me how it happened," he said. "It seems most extraordinary. Hallo, he's got a nasty bump on the back of his head. No bones broken, though, I'm glad to say. I'd like to get him to bed right away. Between us we ought to be able to carry him upstairs."

They managed this without much difficulty, and as Arnold came down again he met Harry Acott standing in the hall.

"What does the doctor say about poor Dick, Inspector?" he asked anxiously.

"No bones broken," Arnold replied. "He seems to have had a nasty smack on the back of the head, though. Come

into the sitting-room and tell me what you know about it."

Seen in the full light, young Acott was in a sorry state. He was wearing thin shoes with no overcoat or hat and was wet through. The weal on the side of his face was by now a reddish-purple that hardly added to his appearance.

"I don't know much about it, Inspector," he replied. "Although in a sense it's all my fault. I shall never forgive myself if it turns out that poor old Dick is badly hurt."

"What do you mean by it being all your fault?" Arnold asked.

"Well, to begin with, Dick would never have gone down to that greenhouse if it hadn't been for me. You see, we were talking yesterday afternoon, and I asked him what he meant to do with his father's collection of orchids. He said he was going to do nothing, for he didn't know anything about them, and cared less. And I told him that was a pity, because old Mr. Polesworth had always said they were valuable. And in the end Dick came round to my point of view. He said that he'd keep the greenhouse fire going as long as he was here, at any rate, so that they wouldn't come to any harm. So we went down to the greenhouse together. The fire was out when we got there, but we started it again, and it hasn't been out since."

"What time was this?" Arnold asked.

"Only a little while after you'd been here yesterday afternoon—about four o'clock or thereabouts. Dick stoked the fire up again first thing this morning and found that it was going all right. And then, just now, he remembered that he hadn't been to it again all day and that it must want some more coke.

"He put on his raincoat, cap and a pair of gum-boots and found the hurricane lantern that Mrs. Repton keeps in the kitchen. Then he started off. I'd have gone to the greenhouse with him, only there wasn't another pair of gum-boots in the house and I didn't want to get my boots soaked through. That's another reason why it's all my fault. If I'd gone with him this wouldn't have happened."

"You stood in the porch, you say. You couldn't see the greenhouse from there?"

"I couldn't see anything. It was as dark as pitch. I watched the hurricane lantern as it went down the path, but, as I dare say you know, the furnace is round the corner of the greenhouse, and once Dick had turned the corner I couldn't see the lantern any longer."

"You didn't hear anything while you were waiting?" Arnold asked.

"Not a sound except the rain pelting down. And that's

what made me wonder what Dick was up to. You can usually hear a fellow shovelling coke a long way off. And then the policeman came along and asked me if everything was all right. Of course, I never thought for a moment that anything was wrong. I knew the policeman wasn't far away, for I'd seen him walking up and down before it became dark. I never dreamed that anything could happen to Dick with a policeman only a few yards away."

"It didn't seem very likely," said Arnold. "Did anybody know this evening that Mr. Polesworth was going out to stoke the furnace?"

"I don't think so," Acott replied. "We talked about it at supper, and Mrs. Repton may have overheard us. But I don't see how any one else could possibly have known."

"All right, Mr. Acott, you'd better stop indoors and keep an eye on your friend." Arnold nodded to Merriion and Tripp, who followed him obediently out of the front door. By the light of the inspector's torch the three of them walked slowly down the path until they reached the furnace.

Here the hurricane lantern, still alight, was standing on the ground. Lying in the bottom of the pit was a cap which Arnold picked up and examined carefully. It was wet and smudged with black at the back. Arnold passed the cap on to Merriion. "See that smudge?" he said.

"Yes, I see it," Merriion replied. "Coke-dust, I fancy. And yet the cap wasn't lying that way up. And perhaps you've noticed there's something missing from here."

"What's that?" Arnold asked.

"The coke-shovel. There was one standing against the side of the pit when we were last here. I can't see it now."

Arnold turned to Tripp. "Did you see the shovel anywhere when you came here this evening with Mr. Acott?" he asked.

"I can't say that I did, sir," Tripp replied. "I was more concerned with looking at young Mr. Polesworth."

"You're positive that nobody got into the garden from the road while you were on duty?"

"Quite positive, sir. I was never more than a few yards from the gate."

"Well, somebody got in somehow, that's quite certain. We'll have a look round and see if he left any traces behind him."

They examined the ground surrounding the greenhouse. This consisted mainly of a kitchen garden, and at this time of the year was practically bare. The greater part of it had been dug over in the autumn and was now very soft and wet.

It was Tripp who made the first discovery. With his torch in action he was walking slowly over a patch of grass beyond the furnace door.

"This looks like the shovel you were speaking about, sir," he exclaimed suddenly.

They gathered round it and Merriion replied, "Yes, that's it, I'm pretty sure. It's a heavy galvanized iron one. Not one of those cheap japanned tin things. And, of course, lying out here in the rain it's got washed pretty clean. I think I can guess how it got there. But you won't find any footprints on this patch of grass."

But when they reached the edge of the patch of grass the expected footprints were immediately obvious. Arnold stared at them with a puzzled frown, for they were not ordinary footprints showing the outline of sole and heel. Although of a size suggesting a large human foot, the impressions were of equal depth all over and showed no detail whatever.

"You two stay on the grass," said Arnold. "We don't want to confuse this more than we can help."

He set off, following the footprints until he reached the hedge bounding the garden. At the point where the footprints reached it there was a gap in the bottom of this hedge which had been stopped with wire netting. But the wire netting had been trodden down, leaving a hole through which a man could crawl.

Arnold returned to the others, who had taken shelter under the lee of the greenhouse. "Two sets of prints, one coming and the other going," he said. "They lead to a gap in the hedge, and beyond that is the football field. Now, then, Tripp, let's have your story in rather more detail. You saw the light from the house when the door was opened, and you could see the hurricane lantern as young Polesworth carried it down the path. How far away from the house were you when you first saw this light?"

"About fifty yards, I should say, sir. I made the gate of the farther field the end of my beat in that direction. And I'd just turned round when I saw the light."

"The gate of the farther field," said Arnold. "That's where I fell over that confounded bicycle last night. And, of course, it's the other side of the house from the football field. What did you make the other end of your beat?"

"The entrance to the football field, sir. I kept patrolling up and down in front of the house between those two gates."

"You wouldn't have seen any one crossing the football field after it got properly dark?"

"Not unless they'd been carrying a lantern, sir, I shouldn't."

"I don't suppose they were doing that. Now, what exactly did you do when you saw the light at the front door?"

"I didn't exactly do anything, sir. I just kept on my beat until I reached the gate."

"The gate of the house, you mean? You didn't increase your regular pace?"

"No, sir, I didn't do that. When I reached the gate I could tell by the light that the front door must still be open. So I waited a few seconds listening, but I didn't hear anything. Then I opened the gate, walked up the path and found Mr. Acott, in the porch."

"All right," said Arnold, "it wasn't your fault, for you were carrying out my orders. I ought to have posted you in the garden and not in the road, it seems. When are you due for relief?"

"At midnight, sir."

"All right. Keep patrolling round the house till then, and when your relief comes, tell him to do the same. You'll be on again at eight o'clock in the morning and I'll see you soon after that."

Tripp saluted and then went off.

Merrion descended the steps to the bottom of the pit and opened the door of the furnace.

"The fire's very low and burning red," he reported. "Nobody's put any coke on it for several hours, I can see that. Seems a pity to let it go out after all the trouble that's been taken over those orchids. Give me that shovel. There's no chance of finding any fingerprints on it now."

Arnold handed him the shovel and he filled up the furnace with coke. "That's better," he said. "You'll take the cap with you, I expect. What do we do next?"

"Call back at the house to see how young Polesworth is getting on," Arnold replied.

"Well, you can do that without my assistance. You'll find me outside when you've finished."

They parted at the porch. Merrion went to the road and walked up it until he reached the gate which had formed the end of Tripp's beat. He turned round and paced carefully the distance between it and the gate of the house. Tripp's estimate had not been far out. The distance, according to Merrion's reckoning, was fifty-five yards.

It was not long before Arnold joined him. "The doctor says that young Polesworth will be all right," he said. "He's going to stop with him for a little just to see how he gets on. There's no point in our hanging about here on a night like this. We'll have a proper look round by daylight to-morrow morning."

They went back to their room at the Red Lion.

"Yes, the fire's the best place on an evening like this," said Merrion. "Bloodthirsty sort of parish this, isn't it? What does it all mean?"

"It means that the chap who tried to lay Acott out last night wasn't satisfied with his failure," Arnold replied.

"If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again," said Merrion. "Yes, that's all right, but he had some nerve to make the second attempt under the very eyes of the bobby. What time did friend Tripp's patrol start?"

"At four o'clock this afternoon. I saw him there when I came back from the school."

"It was broad daylight at four o'clock. And if you saw him the rest of the village saw him, too. The fellow, whoever he was, reached the garden from the football field through a gap in the hedge, I gather."

"He did. But what the dickens was he wearing on his feet? That's what I can't make out. You saw the foot-prints for yourself. What's your idea?"

"I'll tell you when I've had a chance of examining the foot-prints to-morrow. Let's have another look at that cap."

"Here you are," Arnold replied. "I showed it to Acott when I went into the house again just now. He recognised it as the one young Polesworth was wearing when he went out to the furnace. And he told me that it was the one he was wearing yesterday evening."

"So I supposed," said Merrion. "And I recognise it as the one young Polesworth was wearing when he came into the bar here last night. All of which goes to prove that the attack on Acott was one of mistaken identity. Yes, that black smudge on the back of it is coke-dust all right. And that, of course, is why the coke-shovel wasn't in its proper place."

"What do you mean?" Arnold asked.

"Why, this. But you'd better let me reconstruct the whole story. To begin with, the man with the queer footprints knew perfectly well that the bobby was watching the house. He'd seen him for himself and studied his procedure. Tripp was on beat up and down the road, and there was no chance of getting into the garden that way. But our friend must have known of the gap in the hedge and thought it would exactly suit his purpose. He got into the football field somehow, not by the regular entrance, for fear that Trip would spot him. Then he got through into the garden and lay in wait for young Polesworth behind the greenhouse. But how the dickens did he know that Dick was coming to stoke the fire?"

"That's just what I've been wondering," Arnold remarked. "It may interest you to learn that Mrs. Repton knew at supper-time that he meant to."

"Did she!" Merrion exclaimed. "And she's alone in the house—alone, I mean, in the sense that her daughter isn't with

her. We still don't know why that girl went to stay with her aunt in Buckley."

"Don't let your imagination side-track you," said Arnold warningly. "You were talking about the man with the queer footprints lying in wait for young Polesworth behind the greenhouse. Straight on from there, please."

"Very well, then. Now, what would the fellow naturally do first? Look out for a suitable weapon if he hadn't brought one with him. He chucked away that bit of piping after he'd biffed Acott with it, and hadn't got anything by him that would suit his purpose. Perhaps he meant to use the coke-shovel all along. Anyhow, he picked it up and held it ready. And the very instant that young Polesworth got into the pit the fellow hit him."

"How do you know that?" Arnold asked.

"The facts prove it," Merrion replied complacently. "First of all, young Polesworth hadn't had time to put any coke on the fire. I could tell that when I looked at it just now. He was probably looking round for the shovel when the fellow smote him."

Arnold nodded. "You're probably right there," he replied. "Acott, standing in the porch, was rather surprised that he didn't hear the sound of coke being shovelled."

"That's an additional fact," said Merrion. "Then we come to the time factor. I was listening very carefully to what Tripp told you just now. He said that he was by the field gate when he saw the front door open. I paced the distance just now and found it to be fifty-five yards. He didn't hurry, but just came back to the house at his normal slow pace, which I imagine to be about two miles an hour. It would therefore have taken him about fifty-six seconds to reach the gate of the house. And I imagine that his footsteps on the hard road were clearly audible."

"I see what you're getting at," said Arnold. "The fellow who laid out young Polesworth wouldn't have waited a second longer than he could help. Well, there may be something in that."

"There's quite a lot in it, I fancy. And don't forget that the night was extraordinarily dark. But the hurricane lantern showed up young Polesworth enough for the other fellow to hit him. And I dare say it gave him some sort of glimmer to help him find his way back to the gap in the hedge. He wouldn't have risked using a light of any kind himself."

"He went a little bit out of his way, for all that," Arnold replied. "One set of footprints runs straight from the gap in the hedge towards the greenhouse. The other set runs at a slight angle to the first and reaches the hedge about a couple

of yards from the gap. You'll be able to see that for yourself in the morning."

"That means, I suppose, that it wasn't absolutely pitch dark when he came, and that it was when he went. Anyway, when he'd done the job he chucked down the shovel on the grass. And where he may be by this time, goodness only knows."

"Not much use scouring the country for him on a night like this," Arnold growled. "But it must be one of the locals, of course."

"Yes, but which one? Up to a point, things seem pretty clear. The man with the bicycle and the man with the queer footprints are one and the same person. He may be dangerously sane, or he may be a lunatic. Anyhow, he has a grudge against young Dick Polesworth."

"His first attempt to settle the score was yesterday evening. He saw young Polesworth leave the house, waylaid him and attacked him with that handy piece of piping. Having, as he thought, given his enemy a good welt, he chucked away the piping and rode away rejoicing."

"It wasn't until this morning that he found out that he'd made a mistake. His victim had been Acott and not young Polesworth. He wouldn't have had any difficulty in finding out, for I expect that all the village was talking about what had happened. So he decided to have another go this evening, and this time he got the right man. So far, as I say, it's all fairly clear. But then comes the question: Is he the fellow who murdered Polesworth Senior?"

"One would imagine so," Arnold replied dryly.

"Why? Does it necessarily follow because a number of crimes are committed in quick succession, the same person is guilty in every case? There may be two criminals working quite independently of one another. I can imagine this as the sequence of events. Polesworth Senior is killed by A. A natural consequence of which is that his son, Dick, comes to stay at Middleden. B has no connection with A, but has a grudge against Dick. Seeing Dick in the neighbourhood, he takes advantage of the fact. How does that appeal to you?"

"As a theory it has its advantages," Arnold replied. "If, as I'm very much inclined to believe, Joe Masters was the chap who locked Polesworth in the cellar, it accounts for the other two attacks being made after he had been removed from the scene of action. And somehow I can't imagine either Miss Bowring or Wenlock having any particular grievance against young Dick."

Merrion shook his head. "Your reasoning shows a certain

confusion of thought," he said. "Don't you think it's time we went to bed? We had a pretty hectic time last night, and we've earned a decent rest."

CHAPTER XIV

EARLY next morning Arnold and Merrion went to The Spinney. Tripp was on duty outside, and reported to them that his relief had observed nothing unusual during the night.

They rang the bell, which was answered by Mrs. Repton. She and Acott had taken spells of sitting with Dick Polesworth. Early that morning he had recovered consciousness sufficiently to take a little food. After that he had gone to sleep, but was now awake. He complained of violent headaches, but otherwise seemed fairly well.

"Do you think we could see him, Mrs. Repton?" asked Arnold.

"Yes, I think so," she replied. "I'll just go and ask him if he feels up to it."

She returned with the message that Master Dick would be glad to see them, and they went up to his room. He was sitting up in bed looking rather bleary-eyed, but he managed a painful grin at his visitors' entry. "Have you come to comfort the wounded?" he asked.

"I've come to apologise for what happened last night," Arnold replied. "I ought to have taken greater precautions than I did. I hope you'll forgive me."

"Oh, there's nothing to forgive," Dick said. "I got a crack on the head, that's all. But I can't imagine who did it, or why."

"Do you feel up to telling us what you know about it?" Arnold asked.

"To tell the truth, I don't remember much about it," said Dick. "I'd gone down to the greenhouse to make up the fire. Harry had said the day before that it would be a pity to let the orchids die just for the sake of a few shovelful of coke. So on Friday I started the fire again and meant to keep it going at least as long as I was here. I made it up again on Saturday morning, but, to tell the truth, I forgot about it all the rest of the day until Harry reminded me at supper time. Harry's a wonderful chap and never forgets anything. He's been a jolly good pal to me, and I always take his advice. He's one of those sensible fellows who always knows the right thing to do. Whereas everything I tackle on my own always seems to turn out wrong. They all say

at the office that I should have been sacked long ago if it hadn't been for Harry.

"Well, as I was telling you, Harry reminded me at supper that I hadn't made up the greenhouse fire. He offered to go down later and see to it himself, but I wouldn't have that. I'd done it often enough for the poor old dad, and knew my way about. And there was no point in both of us going out on a filthy night like that, was there? All the same, Harry wasn't altogether happy about it after what had happened to him the night before. He said he'd wait in the porch, and if everything wasn't shipshape I was to holler and he'd come along to me.

"I laughed at him for that. But, as it turned out, he was right as usual. I never thought for a moment any one would be hanging about with a bobby marching up and down outside like that. So I got Mrs. Repton's hurricane lantern, and off I went to the greenhouse. I'd just got into the pit and was looking round for the coke-shovel when something hit me. The next thing I remember was waking up here in bed with a head like a pneumatic drill."

"Have you any idea who is likely to have attacked you?" Arnold asked.

Merrion, watching him intently, thought that his eyes wandered shiftily at this question.

"No, I haven't," he replied. "I'm not here often enough to quarrel with any one. Somebody who has fallen out with the poor old dad, I expect."

"Well, we'll do our best to find him," said Arnold. "All you've got to do is to get better as quickly as you can."

They left the room and went downstairs. "What about looking at those footprints by daylight?" Arnold suggested.

"They'll wait," Merrion replied. "I'd much rather have a little chat with Mrs. Repton. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not a bit," said Arnold. "Do I infer that you want to do the talking?"

"You do. Let's go into the kitchen and see if we can find her."

They found Mrs. Repton regaling herself with a cup of tea. She rose at their entry, but Merrion waved her back into her chair.

"That's all right, Mrs. Repton," he said. "We shan't keep you more than a minute or two. It's about that most unfortunate affair in the greenhouse last night. It's a great pity that Master Dick went down to the greenhouse in the dark by himself like that."

"That's just what I thought when I heard him and

Mr. Acott talking about it at supper-time," she replied. "But there, it wasn't my business to say anything."

"No, of course it wasn't," Merrion said. "But I'm afraid that Master Dick's being in bed will give you a lot more work to do. It's a great pity your daughter had to go away to Buckley. Couldn't you ring her up and ask her to come back?"

Mrs. Repton flushed angrily. "No, she can bide where she is," she replied. "She's well enough off with my late husband's sister."

"Why don't you want her back here?" Merrion asked swiftly.

Mrs. Repton looked at him haughtily. "With all due respect, that's my business," she replied.

"Your business as a mother, I suppose you mean. Which one of them is it, Mrs. Repton?"

Mrs. Repton gazed at him in amazement. "And who's been talking to you about my daughter?" she demanded menacingly.

"Oh, one hears a lot of gossip in a village like this," Merrion replied. "It doesn't matter who it was. But it does seem to be queer that Grace should go away the minute Master Dick comes into the house."

"It may be queer, but I'm her mother and I'm going to see she stays away. I don't know what's come over Master Dick since he's been up in London. Until he left home he was the nicest and quietest-spoken boy anywhere around."

"And now he's a bit of a Don Juan? Is that it?"

"I don't know who the gentleman may be that you're referring to. And all I can say is that when he was last here at Christmas-time he said things to my girl that thoroughly upset her. And I meant to take precious good care that it didn't happen again. That's why I packed her off to her aunt at Buckley last Thursday."

"Quite right, Mrs. Repton. It isn't at all nice for a girl to be exposed to insults like that. Besides, she's got a young man of her own, I dare say?"

"Well, she does walk out with young Arthur Ransome. They have known one another all their lives, so there's no great harm in that, surely?"

"Arthur Ransome lives in the village, doesn't he?" Merrion asked.

"Yes, his people live up against the church. His father's the sexton and young Arthur works as gardener for Mr. Wenlock. He's a decent, steady young chap, and I shouldn't be sorry to see my Grace and him make a match of it someday."

"Well, let's hope they will," said Merrion cheerfully. "I don't think there's anything else we want to talk to you about just now. Where's Mr. Acott, by the way?"

"He went to his room an hour or two ago to get a bit of sleep. He's been up all night watching Master Dick."

Seeing that Arnold was showing signs of impatience, Merrion nodded to Mrs. Repton and left the kitchen. They left the house and walked down the path together until they reached the greenhouse. "And what about it now?" Merrion asked quietly.

"Where did you pick up all that gossip about the girl?" Arnold demanded.

"I didn't pick it up," Merrion replied apologetically. "I evolved it from my inner consciousness. Don't you see? It was a perfectly legitimate gamble and it came off all right."

"But you must have known something," Arnold persisted.

"My dear fellow, if you'd only believe me, imagining a thing is sometimes nearly as good as knowing it. It struck me all along that it was rather a queer thing that as soon as those two young fellows settled themselves in the house, Grace Repton left it. You'd think it was just a time when her mother would want her most."

"Then comes the fairly obvious fact that someone isn't exactly fond of Dick Polesworth. Yet, as Dick says himself, he isn't here often enough to have time to make any personal enemies. But it wasn't until we heard that Mrs. Repton knew that he was going out to stoke the furnace that a possible connection occurred to me. Suppose that Grace had been packed off to Buckley because on some previous occasion Dick had made indecent advances to her? And suppose she had a young man whom she told all about it? The said young man's feelings for Dick wouldn't be exactly those of brotherly love. And this, since Dick has not graced the village with his presence since Christmas, is the first opportunity the young man has had of getting at him. He had his first shot on Friday evening and bagged the wrong bird. And I shouldn't wonder if Mrs. Repton sent word to him that he'd have another opportunity last night."

"Well, we'll try and find out something about this Arthur Ransome," said Arnold. "Oh, here comes Green. I told him to be along here this morning. You've heard what happened yesterday evening, I suppose, Green?"

"Yes, sir," Green replied. "Tripp told me all about it. I can't make it out at all, sir."

"Well, you'd better come with us. We're going to see what we can make of it. We'll try the furnace-room first."

But the furnace-room, minutely examined by the light of

day, yielded no further clue. Any footprints which might have been made the evening before would have been immediately washed out by the rain. Apart from the hurricane lantern, which still flickered feebly where Dick had set it down, there was nothing whatever to throw any light on the incident.

From the furnace-room they crossed the plot of grass until they reached the edge of the soft ground. The two sets of footprints still remained deeply impressed on the yielding earth. One set ran straight from the gap in the hedge towards the greenhouse. The other ran from the plot of grass to a point in the hedge three yards from the gap, then turned back along the hedge until the gap was reached.

Merrion studied the footprints with interest. "I'm pretty sure my guess is right," he said. "I wonder if Green could run up to the house and ask Mrs. Repton if she's got a couple of sacks? Any sort of sack will do."

Arnold nodded to Green, who departed on his errand. He returned a minute or two later. "Mrs. Repton says that she hasn't got any sacks in the house, sir," he reported. "But she's pretty sure that there are two or three empty potato sacks in the toolshed."

"That'll be the toolshed," said Merrion, pointing to a small wooden structure at the farther end of the garden. "Let's go and see what we can find."

The shed contained a collection of gardening tools and a bench. On the latter lay a single potato sack. Merrion looked round the shed. "Mrs. Repton's estimate was generous," he said. "There's only one sack here, not two or three. Still, it doesn't matter; one will do for the purposes of experiment. I'm quite willing to sacrifice myself in the sacred cause of detection."

He picked up a bundle of twine and cut a length off it with a pruning knife. Then he wrapped the sack round his right shoe and secured it with twine.

"I've often seen farm hands do that," he continued. "Now, then, watch me take a little walk across the soft ground."

The experiment was entirely convincing. The prints made by Merrion's right foot bore a striking resemblance to those which ran from the greenhouse to the hedge.

"Yes, that's right," Arnold agreed. "The fellow had evidently tied sacks round his boots. But why?"

"Not merely because he didn't want to get them muddy, I fancy," Merrion replied. "Because he didn't want to leave any tracks which could be brought home to him. You couldn't possibly identify those footprints as having been made by any particular pair of feet. Not like the ones made by the gum-boots on the schoolroom floor or by the Uskide-

soled shoes in the cellar. Quite a wise precaution, I call it."

"It's not exactly helpful, anyhow," Arnold remarked. "We'd better go round to the other side of the hedge and see if we can find any traces there."

But when they reached the football ground they saw at once that the search was hopeless. Footprints there were in quantity on the bare patches, but for the rest, the grass was coarse and tough. Of prints similar to those in the garden there was no trace whatever.

"No good," said Arnold despondently. "There was a match played here yesterday, wasn't there, Green?"

"Yes, sir. Our boys were playing Little Mugsworth in the Buckley Junior League. They won three goals to nil."

"Good for them!" Merrion exclaimed. "By the way, Green, what do you know about a lad called Arthur Ransome?"

"He works in the garden for Mr. Wenlock, sir. And he's the captain of the football team. He scored two of the goals our boys got yesterday."

"Stout fellow! Hadn't the football team got some grudge against Mr. Polesworth, Senior?"

"Yes, sir, there was a bit of trouble, and I'm sorry to say that Mr. Polesworth had his window broken."

Green paused and looked at Arnold. "I shouldn't be surprised if Arthur Ransome knew something about that, sir," he said darkly.

"Is he by way of being a bit of a terror, then?" Arnold asked.

"Oh, no, sir, I wouldn't say that. But he's a high-spirited lad, and if there's any mischief on hand he's usually mixed up in it. Mr. Wenlock is quite satisfied with his work, I believe."

"Perhaps he keeps himself in hand while he's at work," Merrion remarked. "Was he at the dance on Wednesday night, do you know, Green?"

"Yes, sir, he was there all the time. And he saw Grace Repton home when it was over."

"Yes, we're given to understand that he would. Is he the sort of chap who'd be likely to clout young Dick Polesworth over the head with a coke-shovel?"

Green hesitated and then turned to Arnold. "I'd thought of that already myself, sir," he said, "but——"

"What made you think of it?" Arnold asked sharply.

"Well, sir, in a place like this I can't help hearing things, but it doesn't always do to take too much notice of them."

"I know that well enough. What did you hear about Arthur Ransome?"

"Well, it came to me in such a roundabout way, sir, that I couldn't very well have cautioned him. But I did hear that

he said in the Red Lion that when he saw Mr. Dick Polesworth again he'd give him something to remember him by. Soon after Christmas, that was, sir."

"What had he against Dick Polesworth?" Arnold asked.

"I couldn't rightly say, sir. But I understood it was something to do with Grace Repton."

Arnold nodded. "Yes, we've heard a whisper of that already. What were you going on to say when I interrupted you just now?"

"Why, this, sir. It was after the attack on Mr. Acott on Friday evening. It seemed to me that whoever hit him had mistaken him for Mr. Polesworth. And I wondered whether it could have been Arthur Ransome. He's got a bike with big acetylene lamp fitted to it."

"Oh, he has, has he? Did you do any more than wonder?"

"Yes, sir, I made inquiries. I found out that on Friday evening Arthur Ransome knocked off work in the garden at four o'clock. He then went into Mr. Wenlock's lodge, where he chopped up firewood until a quarter to six, like he does every Friday in the winter time. After that he went straight to the Red Lion and stayed there talking to some of his pals until past seven o'clock. Then he went home to his tea and didn't go out again the whole evening."

"You're quite sure of all that, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, sir, quite sure. There are at least a dozen people to vouch for it."

"You haven't made inquiries as to what he was doing yesterday evening, I suppose?"

"Not yet, sir. Tripp didn't tell me what had happened until he went on duty at eight o'clock this morning."

"Ransome lives somewhere by the church, doesn't he?" Arnold asked.

"Yes, sir, the second cottage beyond it on the same side of the road."

"Then I think we'll go and interview him. We can't do anything useful here."

They walked down the village until they reached the church. As they did so, the vicar came out and, recognising Arnold, hurried up to them.

"Ah, good-morning, Inspector," he said. "I was going to give myself the pleasure of calling upon you after service. But if you have a few minutes to spare, perhaps you could accompany me to the Vicarage now. I have something very painful to impart to you."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Jennings," Arnold replied. "Of course I'm at your service."

Leaving Merrion and Green to their own devices for the moment, Arnold and the vicar walked the few yards to the Vicarage. The latter took the inspector to his study and bade him be seated.

"It is really most distressing," he said as he sat down in a heavily-carved oak chair. "I had no idea that such flagrant immorality existed in my parish, and it has come as a great shock to me. Both my wife and I spent a very restless night in consequence."

Arnold murmured sympathetically "You want to tell me about it, Mr. Jennings?" he asked.

"I have no option," the vicar replied. "You will remember that yesterday you suggested that I should go to Buckley and see Joe Masters? I considered your recommendation so wise that I determined to carry it out immediately. I went to Buckley shortly after I had seen you, and the authorities were good enough to allow me to interview Joe Masters. I found him, if I may say so, Inspector, in an edifyingly penitent frame of mind."

"Yes, it's wonderful what a day in custody will do," said Arnold unemotionally. "Did you ask him where he was between ten o'clock and midnight on Wednesday?"

"I did indeed," the vicar replied. "At first he preserved an obstinate silence. He told me that it was nobody's business but his own how he spent the time. But I pointed out that his silence had produced a most unfavourable impression, and that in consequence of it the police believed that he was responsible for Mr. Polesworth's death."

"That's quite true," said Arnold. "Did you manage to break down his resistance?"

"I succeeded to the extent that in the end he confessed to me. And I admit that I was so distressed by what he told me that I had rather he had been unable to give any account of himself."

"He confessed that he had gone to the school to lie in wait for Mr. Polesworth?"

"No, he did not, Inspector. He confessed to what in my eyes is a far graver crime. It is only with the greatest reluctance and in the interests of justice that I bring myself to repeat to you what he told me."

The vicar passed his hand across his eyes as though to brush away some horrifying vision. "This is what he said," he continued tragically: "On leaving the hall he went to the house of another of my parishioners, a girl of whose moral character I have hitherto never had the slightest doubt. He stayed alone with her for an hour and a half, and from the expressions he used in speaking to me, I have no doubt that they were together guilty of the greatest impropriety."

But the moral aspect of the situation was lost upon the inspector. "Is this story confirmed by the other party?" he asked.

"To my deep regret it is," the vicar replied. "Immediately on my return from Buckley I went to call upon her. She and her brother live in a somewhat isolated cottage on the outskirts of the village. Her brother's name is Fred Davis and he works for Mrs. Tamplin. What her feelings will be when this terrible affair reaches her ears, I cannot imagine. The slightest suggestion of immorality grieves her to the depths of her heart."

But Arnold was not interested in Mrs. Tamplin's susceptibilities. "You spoke to this Fred Davis' sister?" he asked.

"I spoke to her in my capacity as her spiritual adviser. I should prefer not to repeat what passed between us. Let it suffice that after some initial difficulty I was able to extract an admission of her guilt. And I regret to say that she confessed to me that it is not the first time that Joe Masters had visited her while her brother was absent."

Arnold left the Vicarage to rejoin Merriam and Green. "Joe Masters told the vicar that he spent Wednesday evening with a sister of a man called Fred Davis," he said. "What have you got to say about that, Green?"

Green slapped his thigh expressively. "Well, now, I might have thought of that before, sir!" he exclaimed. "There's been a lot of talk in the village about Joe and Edna Davis. And now you come to mention it, sir, Fred Davis was at the dance, but Edna wasn't."

"Well, I don't altogether congratulate you on the morals of this village," Arnold replied. "We seem to stir up scandal wherever we go. We shall have to see the girl, I suppose. But somehow I don't exactly relish the prospect. Let's begin by interviewing Arthur Ransome."

CHAPTER XV

BUT inquiries at the Ransomes' cottage proved fruitless. Mrs. Ransome, unexpectedly buxom and bright-eyed for a sexton's wife, opened the door to them. But in answer to the inspector's question she shook her head.

"No, sir, he isn't," she replied. "Arthur's gone over to Buckley on his bicycle to see a friend of his, and he won't be back till this evening."

Arnold guessed who the friend might be, but made no comment. "Well, perhaps you can tell us what we want to

know, Mrs. Ransome," he said. "How did Arthur spend his time yesterday after he'd knocked off work?"

"He was playing football in the afternoon," she replied.

"Yes. And after that?"

"He came home for his tea, and then went out again. You can't expect a boy of his age to stay at home all the evening."

"Do you know where he went to?"

"I couldn't say. It doesn't do to ask young people too many questions these days. I've given up asking Arthur where he's off to every time he goes out."

"You can tell me what time he went out, I dare say?"

"Yes, it must have been getting on for seven o'clock. And he came in not many minutes after the church clock had struck ten. He was along with some of his pals, I don't doubt. The boys usually get together of a Saturday evening."

"Well," said Arnold as they left the cottage, "the next thing, I suppose, is to interview this Davis woman. You can show us where she lives, Green."

"It's going to be a bit awkward, sir, if you don't mind my saying so," Green replied hesitatingly. "You see, it being Sunday, her brother Fred'll be at home. And she wouldn't like to tell us about Joe before him."

"That's reasonable enough," Arnold agreed. "All right, we'll leave her till to-morrow. Come on, Merrion, you and I are going for a walk. A little exercise will do us the world of good. The best thing you can do, Green, is to keep your eyes and ears open for any hint of what happened yesterday evening."

"Where does your constitutional take us to?" Merrion asked as they set off. "Not too far, I hope. Remember the Red Lion opens at twelve o'clock on Sundays, and I shall be thirsty by then."

"We're not going far. I want you to show me where you found that weapon in the ditch."

"That won't take us very long. And as we go we can discuss the ramifications of this very pretty little problem. To begin with, what exactly did the vicar tell you about Joe Masters?"

Arnold repeated the conversation. "And that seems conclusive. Unless Joe Masters and this girl fixed the story up in advance to provide him with an alibi."

"That doesn't seem to me altogether likely," Merrion replied. "As an alibi it's a bit too damaging. I don't know, of course, what view the girl's brother would take of it. But I imagine that Mrs. Masters would have quite a lot to say. In fact, she'd probably make Joe's life a burden to him."

"Yes, that's how it seems to me," Arnold agreed. "Of course, if the story's true, it puts Joe clean out of the picture."

"That's another reason why I'm inclined to believe it. As you know, I've never cared about your theory of a practical joke. To my mind, everything shows that Polesworth Senior was deliberately murdered—and in the furnace-room at that."

"Well, I suppose Joe might have murdered him there," Arnold replied doubtfully.

Merrion shook his head. "I don't think so," he replied. "It isn't the type of murder that a man like Joe would commit. And if it was an accidental murder—if Joe just clouted him on the head and then fancied he'd killed him, I mean—he'd never have thought of the dodge of carrying him to the coal-cellar."

"Although he had the necessary keys to open the iron gate and the cellar door?" Arnold suggested.

"That point doesn't arise. Polesworth had his own keys in his pocket, remember. No, there are only two alternatives that I can see. Miss Bowring and Wenlock murdered him accidentally, as I've already described to you. Or else he was deliberately murdered by someone we haven't yet suspected."

"Don't forget that the murderer must have had a very extensive knowledge of local conditions," Arnold remarked.

"Yes, I know. But look here, don't let's be side-tracked by the attacks on Acott and young Dick. I'm pretty sure now that they had nothing whatever to do with Polesworth's death. Somebody—Arthur Ransome, most probably—wanted to get his own back on Dick. Hence all these complications."

"That's all very well up to a point," said Arnold. "But the theory that Arthur Ransome committed both assaults won't wash. You heard what Green told us just now? According to him, Ransome was sitting in the bar of the Red Lion at the moment when Acott was attacked."

"What exactly are alibis of that kind worth in a case like this, when all the locals are hand in glove? For instance, I'll bet you that when Polesworth's windows were broken, the culprit had dozens of folk ready to swear he was miles away at the time. The fact is that the Polesworth family were not popular, and public sympathy would be with any one who annoyed them."

"Yes, I'll admit that," Arnold replied. "But if you had convincing proof that Ransome actually was in the Red Lion when Acott was attacked, what then?"

"Then I should think that he had hired a pal to do the job for him," Merrion said promptly. "I tell you, I know something about small villages and the difficulty of getting any of

the inhabitants to give one another away. Especially to the police. But that wouldn't apply in a case of deliberate murder. I don't suppose any one in Middleden, with the exception, of course, of those actually concerned, knows who is responsible for Polesworth's death. But here we are. This is where I found that bit of piping. I stuck a twig in the ditch to mark the place, and it's there still."

They stopped, and Arnold stared reflectively at the ditch as though hoping it would reveal the secret of who threw the weapon into it. Merrion, meanwhile, wandered across to the opposite side of the road towards the beginning of a path which went off across the fields between hedges on either side.

"I wonder where that goes to?" he asked thoughtfully. Arnold turned round. "Where what goes to?" he replied. "What are you talking about now?"

"About this convenient and apparently frequently used path. You notice that it starts almost opposite the point in the ditch where I found the weapon."

"Well, what if it does?" Arnold demanded.

"It strikes me as possibly significant that the weapon was thrown away just here." Merrion walked a couple of paces down the path before something lying in the fields to one side of it caught his eye. He forced his way through the hedge and examined it. It was an old and rotten signpost which had been broken off, presumably by cattle. The stump was still in the ground and to the broken part a pointing finger was still attached. With difficulty Merrion deciphered the lettering upon it: "Bridle path to Buckley."

"So this path leads to Buckley, does it?" he said thoughtfully. "The beginning of the short cut across the fields that I was told about no doubt. I wonder if, after all, that late train had something to do with it?"

"What late train?" Arnold asked.

"Why, that most convenient train that leaves Buckley at eleven thirty-five and gets to London at twenty-five minutes past midnight. It fits, yes, by jove, it fits perfectly."

"I'm listening," Arnold remarked laconically.

"That's unusual for you," Merrion replied. "You're usually so full of your own ideas that you haven't got time to listen to any one else. But you'll have to wait. I'm thirsty and I want my lunch. Besides, I haven't got the details worked out yet. Come on, let's get back to the Red Lion."

Arnold had to be content with this. Merrion refused to say another word till he had consumed two helpings of boiled pork. Then he pushed his chair back and lighted a cigarette. "That's better," he said. "Has it occurred that, as a race, the English owe their virtue of sound common sense to substantial joints

accompanied by beer? Now, a Frenchman, for instance——"

"Oh, shut up!" Arnold exclaimed. "I don't want to hear your views upon our insular virtue. If you must talk, tell me what you meant about that late train."

"I was going to," Merrion replied. "My remarks about English food were merely meant as an exordium, if you know what that means. Thanks to a comforting sense of repletion, I can now express my ideas in logical order."

"I'm glad of that," said Arnold dryly. "Suppose you begin."

"I'll begin by discussing the time of Polesworth's death. Unfortunately, we have no exact evidence on that point. We don't know when he left the house to attend to the greenhouse fire. But we do know that Mrs. Repton saw him alive just before ten o'clock and the medical evidence is that he died not later than eleven.

"Now, I've already explained my theory of what happened to him, and I'm not going over all that again. I'll merely remind you of the outline. Polesworth was knocked on the head in the furnace-room, then carried across to the cellar for the gas to finish him. We will suppose that he left the house at a quarter past ten and was knocked on the head immediately he reached the furnace-room. If his murderer knew in advance exactly what he meant to do, he could have finished the rest of the job in ten minutes. In other words, he would have been ready to clear out by ten twenty-five. That would have left him an hour and ten minutes to catch the last train at Buckley. It is a distance of four miles across the fields, and any average walker could easily cover it in the time.

"Now, it's my belief that we've actually seen the shoes that the murderer was wearing. Joe Masters' story of having picked up that pair of Uskide-soled shoes is, in my opinion, perfectly true. He picked them up by the roadside, a few yards beyond the school. The murderer threw them away deliberately and put on a second and, I expect, totally different pair which he had with him. He was running no risk of leaving footprints that could be traced to him.

"He still had in his pocket the weapon with which he laid Polesworth out. That's it over there—the piece of lead piping with rubber bound round it. Quite naturally, he did not want to leave it on the scene of the crime, where it was sure to be found. But, equally naturally, he wanted to dispose of it in some safe place. What safer place than the ditch, where, sooner or later, it would become silted over with mud?"

"Would it be unkind to remind you that there isn't a particle of evidence for all this," said Arnold.

"Not a bit," Merrion replied cheerfully. "You ought to

know my methods well enough by this time. Let your imagination work first to propound a likely theory, then look for the facts to prove it. It's far better than, working the other way round."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Arnold doubtfully. "However, go ahead. I can see you haven't finished yet."

"I haven't, not nearly. At this point we have to balance opportunity and motive. By opportunity, I mean an intimate knowledge of such local details as where the key of the cellar was kept. And by motive, I mean one powerful enough to incite murder.

"Now consider, first, opportunity as I have defined it. Confine yourself, if you like, to the knowledge of where the cellar key was kept. Who outside Middleden could have possessed that knowledge? Very few people indeed. Perhaps the Board of Education Inspector who visits the school periodically may have noticed the key hanging over the fireplace. But, however unsatisfactory Government inspectors may find a school, they usually draw the line at murdering its correspondent."

"Oh, do try and talk sense," said Arnold wearily.

"I am talking sense. I'm trying to demonstrate to you that it is inconceivable that any stranger to Middleden could have carried out the murder in the way he did. On the other hand, consider now the question of motive. Who outside Middleden had any reason for wishing to murder Polesworth? He seems to have been an unpleasant sort of chap, and he may have made enemies before he came here. But why should a past enemy have waited all this time to put an end to him?"

"You know perfectly well that somebody in this village did it," Arnold remarked.

"Somebody in the village, yes. But not necessarily someone permanently resident in it. Someone who came here often enough to know where the key was kept and that Polesworth was in the habit of going out every evening to stoke up his fire. Now, who fulfils this condition and had at the same time a convincing motive for murder? There's only one possible answer to that question."

"Our young friend Dick," Arnold replied promptly. "Yes, I know. I've had him in mind all along. But, unfortunately for your theory, he wasn't here on Wednesday evening."

"There you go again," Merrion exclaimed. "Letting mere facts interfere with the process of pure reasoning. Don't you see that the only person in the world who had any real reason for killing Polesworth was his son Dick? And there's nothing complicated or psychological about it, either. He wanted the old man's money. Don't you remember how he spoke when

we first saw him? He's fed-up with that office of his and wants to live a life of leisured ease."

"Lots of people want that," Arnold remarked. "And still they refrain from removing their parents from their path."

"Merely because they're afraid of being found out, in most cases. But let's get back to young Dick. How do you know that he wasn't here on Wednesday evening?"

"Because both he and Acott agree that at the time Polesworth was killed, Dick was lying beastly drunk in some low doss-house. You are not going to suggest that he and Acott made up that story between them, are you?"

"Not for a moment. Acott's account of the way the two of them spent their evening is perfectly straightforward. But there's one point about it that struck me. Acott was very much surprised that Dick should have come under the influence of liquor to that extent. He said he'd never known him like it before. And, from what I've seen with my own eyes, I fancy that Dick is no chicken where putting down the drink is concerned. What would you say if I suggested that he was shamming drunk that evening?"

"I should say that he would have found it pretty difficult to deceive any one who knew him so well as Acott," Arnold replied.

"I'm not so sure about that. Shamming drunk isn't very difficult, especially if other people have had a drop, too. Now what do we actually know about Dick's movements on Wednesday evening? We can account for them up to about eight o'clock, while he was in Acott's company. Somewhere about that time Acott put him into the nearest disreputable hotel and hurried back to King's Cross to catch his train. Then for twelve hours or so there is a complete gap. Dick tells us that he woke up in unfamiliar surroundings, went to Liverpool Street and caught a train at eight forty-five. I've no doubt if you made inquiries you would find that it was perfectly true that he did. But where was he between eight o'clock on Wednesday evening and eight o'clock on Thursday morning? Lying in a drunken stupor in some low hotel? I doubt it."

"Are you suggesting that he occupied his time in murdering his father?" Arnold asked.

"I'm suggesting that it would be quite possible for him to have done so. I've been studying that invaluable time-table that hangs in the bar downstairs. As you have possibly noticed for yourself, there is an excellent service of trains between London and Buckley. For instance, there's a fast train which leaves London at eight twenty-eight and gets to Buckley at nine-ten. Walking briskly over the fields, he could have got to The Spinney a few minutes after ten. And on that

particular evening he would run very little risk of being seen, as practically everybody was at the whist drive and dance."

"Wait a minute," said Arnold. "You're going a bit too fast. How could Dick have known anything about the whist drive? It isn't at all the sort of subject that his father would have written to him about."

Merrion smiled. "That question shows lack of observation on your part," he replied. "When I got here on Friday morning and walked into the bar, almost the first thing I noticed was a bright yellow poster hanging up on the wall. It announced that a whist drive and dance would be held at Middle-den Village Hall on Wednesday, January 11th. Mr. Cadby saw me looking at it, remarked that it ought to have been taken down before then, and proceeded to do so. I asked him, more for the sake of making conversation than anything else, how long it had been up there. And he told me that he'd put it up himself a week or two before Christmas. Dick was down here at Christmas time, and we know from experience that he frequents the bar."

"All right," said Arnold. "I'll admit that Dick might have known about the whist drive. But I've got other objections to this precious theory of yours. To begin with, what about the shoes?"

"I don't see any difficulty there. I've had a look at Dick's feet, and I'm willing to bet he wears size eight in shoes. I tell you he left his shoes by the roadside for the first comer to pick up, and put on another pair."

"No, that won't do!" Arnold exclaimed. "Where did he get the second pair of shoes from? Was he carrying them round with him all the evening?"

"Of course he wasn't," Merrion replied. "Why should he, when he knew well enough where to find them when he wanted them? You forget that he was in the habit of keeping clothes and things at The Spinney. He'd probably have a front door key of his own. If he hadn't, he opened the door with his father's key. So there's another of your objections answered."

"Imagination's a wonderful thing," said Arnold. "I believe if you were hard enough pushed to it, you would support a theory that the man in the moon killed Polesworth. What about the weapon? Dick picked that up by chance on his way here, I suppose?"

"I'm surprised at you, of all people, raising difficulties about the weapon. Dick was carrying that with him all the evening, of course. A policeman carries his truncheon without any one noticing it, doesn't he? Dick carried that bit of piping in exactly the same way—down the leg of his trousers."

Arnold made no comment upon this. "And the corner

torn off the letter with Wenlock's telephone number scribbled on the back of it?" he asked.

"Oh, that!" Merrion replied contemptuously. "I don't believe that Polesworth ever got it."

"Never got it!" Arnold exclaimed. "But, man alive, Green found it in his pocket!"

"I'm not denying that. But why shouldn't it have been slipped into his pocket after he was knocked out? Can't you realise that, all along, Dick was trying to create the impression that the crime was committed by someone in Middleden? And as far as you're concerned, he seems to have succeeded."

"Perhaps I'd better explain what I mean a little more fully. Dick knew that his father believed, correctly as it turns out now, that someone was pinching coal from the school cellar. He also knew that, with the exception of himself, nobody outside the village could possibly be aware of that. So he typed a letter setting out that the writer had evidence which would lead to the discovery of the thief, and asking Polesworth to make it convenient to meet him at eleven o'clock on Wednesday night. Then he tore off the corner of this letter, leaving enough words on it to suggest the meaning of the whole. Finally, he scribbled the telephone number on the back of it. This fragment he pushed into Polesworth's pocket after he'd knocked him out."

Arnold made no reply and, after a pause, Merrion continued.

"You know, it's very extraordinary that Dick should have been bowled out in the very same spot that he attacked his father. How he must have loathed the idea of going down to the greenhouse last night. He'd never have gone near the place again if it hadn't been for the economically-minded Acott. Acott told him that, as the orchids were valuable, he ought to save them. And, of course, he didn't dare to refuse to stoke up the furnace. Having a guilty conscience, he was afraid that it might look suspicious if he did. So he went, only to be struck at himself by the outraged lover."

Arnold snatched at this remark. "Oh, so you are agreed that it was Arthur Ransome who was lying in wait for him?" he asked.

Merrion shrugged his shoulders. "Arthur Ransome or somebody else," he replied. "It doesn't seem to me to matter very much who it was. We're agreed that that incident has no bearing on the death of Polesworth Senior. My point is that Dick got biffed on the very spot, both topographically and anatomically, as he biffed his father. And I maintain that it's a very striking illustration of the mysterious working of Providence."

"I dare say it is," said Arnold impatiently. "All non-

sense apart, do you seriously believe that Dick Polesworth murdered his father ? ”

“ Serious belief is one thing and logical deduction another,” Merrion replied with irritating deliberation. “ It’s a possibility that I think you ought to consider. And the first thing to do is to find out the name of the hotel at which Dick is supposed to have spent Wednesday night.”

“ Not much difficulty there,” Arnold remarked. “ Young Acott ought to be able to tell us that.”

“ If I were you, I shouldn’t run the risk of seeming too inquisitive in Acott’s eyes. You’ve got to remember that those two fellows are pretty thick with one another.”

“ Meaning that Acott is in the secret ? ” Arnold asked.

“ No, I don’t mean that. A man may be expected to confide most things to his best friend, but not murder. What I mean to suggest is that anything you say to Acott will sooner or later reach Dick’s ears.”

“ Yes, I dare say that’s true enough,” Arnold agreed.

“ It is. Besides, you can find out what you want to know without reference to Acott. You know well enough what these places are like. You pay for your night’s lodging as you go in, sign the book and no further questions are asked. Your people at the Yard ought to be able to find out which particular low haunt Acott selected.”

“ Not a bad idea,” Arnold replied. “ I think I’ll take a stroll as far as the telephone-box and ring them up. But, mind you, I think you’ve gone off on the wrong track this time.”

CHAPTER XVI

MERRION remarked that a short stroll would aid his digestion, and they left the Red Lion together. “ Now we are out we may as well go and see if everything is in order at The Spinney,” said Arnold. “ It won’t take us more than a couple of minutes.”

They found Tripp pacing solemnly up and down the road. The inspector accosted him. “ Any excitement since I saw you last ? ”

“ No, sir,” Tripp replied. “ Nobody’s been in or out of the house, except the doctor, who called about twelve o’clock. And I haven’t seen anybody suspicious about the place.”

“ If you know who’s suspicious and who isn’t, you’re a wiser man than I am,” said Arnold. “ Have you seen any one about the place at all ? ”

"No, sir, I haven't. A few people have been past, that's all. None of them loitered in any way."

"Bit chilly for loitering. So you've nothing to report at all?"

"Nothing of any importance, sir. But one of the gentlemen has dropped his cigarette lighter. I was going to pick it up when I came off duty and hand it in."

"All right," said Arnold, and was about to turn away. But Merriion stepped forward.

"A cigarette lighter?" he said. "I wonder if it's mine, by any chance? I should recognise it at once if I saw it. Where is it lying?"

"Just over the hedge by the gate of the house, sir. Perhaps you'd like me to show you."

The three of them walked to the gate and looked over the hedge on the left-hand side of it. Beyond this was a small patch of rough grass, where three or four apple trees were growing. Tripp stretched out his arm and pointed.

"There you are, sir," he said. "It's a little difficult to make out, for it's right down in the grass. But it happened to catch my eye an hour or so ago when the sun came out and shone on it."

It took Merriion a second or two to locate the object. "Yes, I see it," he exclaimed. "It's not unlike mine, though I couldn't swear to it at this distance. I think I'll just slip in through the gate and pick it up."

He did so, and returned with the lighter. Arnold nodded to the constable. "All right, Tripp, you can leave this to me. I'll take care of it."

Tripp saluted and marched off on his monotonous beat. Merriion examined the lighter with deep interest. "Silver, hall-marked," he said. "Works all right, but has apparently run out of petrol. On the side of it are engraved the initials 'R.P.', which I am willing to bet stand for Richard Polesworth. Well?"

Arnold shrugged his shoulders. "If it is Dick's he must have dropped it there sometime," he replied.

"Yes, he dropped it there all right. And even when I'd made up my mind that Polesworth had been scuppered by the greenhouse, I never thought of searching that plot of grass. I'm getting careless as I grow older, that's what's the matter."

"What's the plot of grass got to do with the greenhouse?" Arnold asked.

"Nothing. But don't you see? Suppose you were waiting in the dark for Polesworth to come out of the front door, where would you take up your position? Why, behind one of those apple trees, of course. He wouldn't see you even if he turned his torch that way, which wasn't particularly

likely. Then when you'd seen him go down the path to the greenhouse, you'd nip after him in those Uskide-soled shoes of yours. You noticed the existence of the plot of grass, I suppose ? ”

“ I looked all round the house for footprints and didn't find any. That wasn't surprising, as it had been raining pretty hard at intervals all night. I noticed the plot right enough, but I didn't worry my head about it, for I knew that rough grass wouldn't retain footprints.”

“ So that for all you know the lighter may have been lying there on Thursday morning ? ”

“ For all I know, it may have been lying there since Christmas, and I expect it has.”

“ It is a bit tarnished, certainly,” Merrion agreed.

“ I'm going to show it to young Dick and hear what he's got to say,” Arnold replied firmly. “ And you can come with me, if you think it will set your mind at rest.”

Mrs. Repton opened the front door to them. “ Yes, Master Dick's awake now,” she said in reply to the inspector's inquiry. “ The doctor came this morning and said he was going on quite well. He brought some tablets for me to give Master Dick at six o'clock. He said they will take away the pain in his head and make him sleep. The doctor said he'd be out and about again in a day or two, but he won't be able to attend his poor father's funeral to-morrow.”

Arnold and Merrion went upstairs to find Dick Polesworth in bed, with Acott sitting beside him. The latter stood up as they entered the room. “ Do you want to talk to me, Inspector ? ” he asked.

“ Not just now, Mr. Acott,” Arnold replied. “ We want a few words with your friend here.”

“ Then I'll leave you to it,” said Acott. “ If you should want me, you'll find me downstairs. I'm going to ask Mrs. Repton if she can make me a cup of tea.”

Arnold waited until Acott had left the room, then sat down in the chair he had vacated. “ Well, how are you feeling, Mr. Polesworth ? ” he asked.

“ A lot better than I did when you saw me this morning,” Dick replied. “ I say, you haven't found out who laid me out, have you ? ”

“ We've got our own ideas about that,” said Arnold. “ But that isn't what we've come to talk to you about now. I believe we've found something belonging to you.”

“ Have you ? ” Dick replied. “ I'm always leaving my belongings about, as Harry will tell you. What is it ? ”

Arnold produced the cigarette lighter and held it before Dick's eyes. “ This is it,” he said quietly.

Dick grinned as he recognised it. "Yes, that's mine right enough," he said. "I say, I'm jolly glad you found it. I thought I'd lost it for good and all. I meant to get another one just like it and have my initials engraved on it so that Harry wouldn't know."

This sounded rather cryptic. "What didn't you want Mr. Acott to know?" Arnold asked.

"Oh, of course you wouldn't understand. Harry gave me the lighter the Christmas before last, and since then I've always carried it about with me. Almost always, that is. Sometimes I've forgotten to put it in my pocket and left it somewhere. For instance, on the dressing-table at home. At Harry's people's house where I lodge, I mean."

"But you've never lost it before?"

"Well, not exactly lost it. It's always turned up again, if you know what I mean."

"I understand. Now, when did you lose it this time? Or shall we put it this way: When was it last in your possession?"

Dick frowned. "Really, Inspector, I couldn't say," he replied. "You know, I'm terribly careless about things like that."

"So it seems," said Arnold a trifle impatiently. "When did you first miss it?"

"In the train on my way here on Friday morning. I wanted a cigarette and found that I hadn't got a match. So I began feeling in my pockets for the lighter, but it wasn't there. I thought I must have left it on my dressing-table, but since you've found it, it seems that I haven't."

"Have you had it in your possession since you were here at Christmas?"

"Oh, yes, I think I must have; I should have missed it before I did, if I hadn't."

"You didn't lose it last Wednesday evening, by any chance, did you, Mr. Polesworth?" Arnold asked sternly.

"Anything might have happened on Wednesday evening," Dick replied. "I don't know what came over me, for I've never been so completely sozzled in my life. I can remember having supper with Harry, but after that I don't remember a thing until I woke up next morning in that beastly hotel."

"Perhaps your memory will come back one of these days," said Arnold.

He was about to leave the room when Dick called after him: "I say, you've taken my lighter with you."

"Yes, I'm going to borrow it for the present," Arnold replied meaningly.

He and Merrion left the house and walked a few yards down the road in silence. "Unconvincing," Merrion remarked at last.

"Confound you!" Arnold exclaimed. "I believe the vivid imagination of yours has made a lucky shot again. Come along, I'm going to ring up the Yard."

"With rather more confidence than you had just now," said Merion quietly. "Looks uncommonly like it, doesn't it?"

Arnold merely grunted. He didn't feel in the least like complimenting Merion upon his powers of detection. He had made a lucky guess, that was all. He said no more until he reached the call-box.

He entered it, made his call, and after a few minutes rejoined Merion.

"They're going to look round the smaller hotels at King Cross straight away," he said. "I'll ring them up in the morning to hear what luck they've had. But even if we find the place, I don't know that it's going to help us much."

"No, nor do I," Merion replied cheerfully. "At present we've got no more than a very strong suspicion. We haven't caught young Dick out yet by any manner of means."

"I'm perfectly well aware of that," growled Arnold. "Let's get back to that fire of ours and see if we can hit on some bright idea."

But supper-time came, and the bright idea still eluded them. "We're stumped until we can find some proof that Dick was on the spot when his father was done in," said Merion when the meal had been cleared away. "And how we're going to do that, I can't for the life of me see. We can make inquiries at Buckley station, of course, but the chances of picking up a confident witness there are almost nil. Dick isn't such a frequent passenger that he's likely to have been recognised. And if any one did see him, you cannot expect them to swear to the exact time and date. And Dick, I fancy, is not the sort of chap you could trap into any kind of damaging admission."

"You're not exactly comforting," Arnold remarked. "What makes you say that about Dick?"

"The way he behaved when you confronted him with the lighter. A mug would have hesitated, but he didn't—not for an instant. He admitted straight away that it was he. He had the sense to see that you had only to ask Acott to find out that it was Dick's. Then, again, he was sharp enough not to say that he had lost it when he was here at Christmas. Acott had probably seen him using it since then. I think he got out of his difficulty remarkably well. And, as I dare say you noticed, he hinted at his line of defence. He was always leaving things about, he told us. He might have left the lighter about for someone else to pick up."

"If he's guilty I'll catch him out yet," said Arnold with

determination. "For heaven's sake set your imagination at work and see if you can't think out some likely dodge."

But in this case Merriion's imagination proved sterile. Finally they gave it up in despair and went to bed, hoping that the morning would bring some brainwave to them.

The night passed without any fresh alarm, and Arnold and Merriion met again at breakfast. "There's nothing for it, but just to slog away," said the inspector despondently. "The first thing is for me to ring up the Yard again and find out if they've had any luck. Then we'll interview Arthur Ransome and the Davis woman."

They put this programme in operation. Arnold made his call and came out of the box slightly more optimistic. "They've found the place all right," he reported. "It was easy enough. They went round until they came upon Dick's signature in the visitors' book."

"His signature!" Merriion exclaimed. "Why, according to his own story he wasn't in a fit state to write his signature."

"Well, his name's there, anyhow. Perhaps Acott wrote it for him. I shall go up this afternoon and make inquiries myself. Now we'll get along to Wenlock's place and see if we can find Arthur Ransome."

As they entered Mr. Wenlock's drive-gates they saw a turdy good-looking lad clipping the hedge with a pair of shears. "That's our man," said Merriion confidently. "And a hefty young chap he is, too."

The lad was whistling away cheerfully and took no notice of them until they were within a few paces of him.

"Is your name Arthur Ransome?" Arnold asked sternly.

The lad stopped whistling and let the shears dangle in his hand. "Yes, that's me," he replied. "What might you be wanting, if I may make so bold?"

"I am an inspector from Scotland Yard," said Arnold.

I want to ask you a few questions, and I warn you to be careful what you say, for it may be used in evidence."

Ransome's eyes opened wide in astonishment. "Lummy!" he exclaimed. "What have I done, then?"

"That's just what I want to know. Young Mr. Polesworth, no friend of yours, is he?"

"He's a sneaking, dirty swine, and you can tell him I said so," Ransome replied. "I shall have something to say to him before long."

"Well, he's in the village. Why don't you say it to him?"

"With his father lying dead in the house? It wouldn't be decent. But just you wait till the old man's properly buried and then you'll see."

Arnold shook his head. "That sort of thing won't do,

Ransome," he said. "Where were you at nine o'clock on Saturday evening?"

"Where was I? Why, where should I have been? At the Walnut Tree, of course."

"Where is this Walnut Tree?" Arnold demanded.

Ransome made a rather vague gesture. "Why, half a mile or thereabouts down the road," he replied. "It's the first pub you come to after you leave the village."

"Are you quite sure that you were there at nine o'clock?"

"Of course I am. The match began at half-past seven and didn't finish until just upon closing time."

"What match are you talking about?" Arnold asked.

Ransome seemed amazed at such deplorable ignorance.

"Why, the darts match, of course," he replied patiently.

"Us chaps from the Red Lion play the Walnut Tree team every other Saturday in the winter time, turn and turn about. And last Saturday it was our turn to play at the Walnut Tree."

"Can you produce any one who will swear to your being at the Walnut Tree at nine o'clock?"

"Not more than sixteen, I can't. We were playing eight a side, and that makes sixteen, doesn't it? Not to speak of the chaps who were sitting in the bar watching."

"Now, Ransome, I'm going to investigate the truth of your story," said Arnold. "And if I find you've been lying to me, so much the worse for you. How do we get to this Walnut Tree you're talking about?"

Ransome gave the necessary directions and they set off. The Walnut Tree proved to be a small wayside inn, and on entering the bar they found the landlord polishing the counter.

Their inquiries did not take very long. It was perfectly true that throughout the winter the darts team of the Red Lion and the Walnut Tree engaged in a fortnightly contest at either house alternately. On the previous Saturday the match had been held at the Walnut Tree. Eight champions from the Red Lion had appeared, among them Arthur Ransome. They had played darts steadily from half-past seven till just on ten o'clock. The landlord was perfectly certain that neither Arthur Ransome nor any of his companions had left the premises during that time.

"Well, that's that," said Arnold as they walked away from the Walnut Tree. "You're not going to pretend that Ransome faked that alibi, are you?"

Merrion shook his head. "No, that particular alibi is sound enough," he replied. "Besides, now that I've seen Ransome I'm pretty sure that he didn't clout young Dick on Saturday night."

"In spite of the fact that he openly vows vengeance against him?" Arnold asked.

"Yes, in spite of that. Unless I'm very much mistaken, Ransome isn't of the type that would lie in wait for a fellow to catch him unawares and clout him with a coke-shovel. When he decides that a fitting interval has elapsed after Polesworth's death, he'll go straight up to Dick and hit him in the eye, or something like that. Really, it's very puzzling."

"I thought you said yesterday that it didn't very much matter who attacked Acott and Dick."

"I did, but I confess now that I was utterly wrong. It matters enormously. No, I'm not going to explain why just yet. You'd only tell me that I was indulging in another flight of imagination. What are you going to do next?"

"Meet Green and go with him to interview the Davis woman," Arnold replied. "You can come, too, if you like."

"Thanks very much. Washing dirty linen is not a favourite occupation of mine. You go along with Green. You'll find me at the Red Lion when you've finished."

Merrion strolled to the Red Lion to find the bar empty of customers and Mr. Cadby sitting over the fire reading his newspaper. He bought beer for both of them and entered into conversation with the landlord.

"I suppose you see a good deal of young Mr. Polesworth when he's down here?" he asked casually.

"Well, not what you might say a good deal," Mr. Cadby replied. "You see, his father didn't approve of drinking, and while he was alive Master Dick had to be pretty careful. He'd slip in here as often as he could and put away three or four whiskies in quick time. He never stayed very long in case his father should find out where he was. And he never thought of treating any of the chaps, either."

"Three or four whiskies in quick time is a pretty stiff dose," Merrion remarked. "Did he ever seem any the worse for them?"

"I can't say that he did," Mr. Cadby replied. "And I'm pretty sure that he can't have shown any signs, or his father would have noticed them quick."

"Did his friend Mr. Acott come in with him while they were both staying down here at Christmas?"

"Yes, he and Master Dick usually came in together. But he didn't drink level. He never had more than one drink each time when he came in. And that was no more than half a pint of bitter. And when it was his turn to pay he'd always stand a treat round the house. If you want my opinion, he's twice the young man that Master Dick is."

Merrion was still chatting to Mr. Cadby when Arnold came in, looking rather red about the face. He drank a pint of beer and then he and Merrion went upstairs to the sitting-room.

"My word, that girl's a holy terror!" Arnold exclaimed as he flung himself into a chair. "She'd have flung the saucepans at me if Green hadn't forcibly restrained her. She told me that the vicar had already been nosing round, and that she wasn't going to stand any more of it. Who her friends might be was no business of mine, and I could take myself off to the infernal regions."

"Nice gentle creature," Merriion commented. "Did you make anything of her in the end?"

"Yes, after a pretty stormy five minutes I made her see reason. I explained to her that Joe Masters would find himself in serious trouble if we couldn't determine exactly where he was between ten and midnight on Wednesday. And then she came out with it, quite nicely considering. In fact, now that the secret's out she seems rather proud of it. She said that if Mrs. Masters didn't like it she could do the other thing."

"I expect that when this affair leaks out those two women will be at it hammer and tongs. And then by way of a diversion they'll both set about the unfortunate Joe. However, that's not our business. Go ahead."

"There isn't very much more to say. She and Joe had arranged the meeting beforehand. She didn't go to the whist drive and dance at all. Told her brother she had too much to do in the house. So her brother went without her. Joe went, too, but came away after the whist drive, leaving his wife at the dance. She swears that Joe got to her place at ten o'clock and didn't leave again until just before midnight. In fact he hadn't been gone more than a couple of minutes before her brother came in."

"And you don't doubt that?"

"Not for a moment. The details she gave were too realistic. I won't repeat them."

"So that you're satisfied at last that Joe had nothing to do with Polesworth's death?"

Arnold nodded. "I am," he replied. "I shall see the superintendent at Buckley and tell him that I am not prepared to bring any further charge against Joe."

"I think you're right. Well, we seem to have cleared up several little points this morning. What's the next move?"

"As soon as we've had lunch we're going up to London to make a few investigations there."

"You've made a mistake in the pronoun," said Merriion urbanely. "You should have said I, not we."

"Do you mean that you're not coming with me?" Arnold asked.

"That's exactly what I do mean. You'd far better form

your own opinions without having me at your elbow to influence you. Besides, I'm very comfortable where I am. Ah, here comes lunch. I can hear Mrs. Cadby's fairy footsteps on the staircase."

CHAPTER XVII

ARNOLD had obtained his parents' address from Acott, and as soon as he reached London he called upon them. Mrs. Acott, whom he found at home, was a motherly old lady, who expressed concern at Dick's bereavement. Dick had lodged with them now for three or four years, and she looked upon him as a second son. Dick was a dear boy, although slightly irresponsible at times. He and Harry were inseparable, and Mrs. Acott liked to think that Harry exercised a good influence upon him.

Yes, she remembered Wednesday afternoon perfectly. The boys had come home from the office rather earlier than usual and told her that they would both be away next day. Harry had to go to Hull and Dick to Harwich. It often happened that their firm sent them away like that.

Harry had to catch a train that evening, but Dick was not going to start until early next morning. Harry put a few things in a small suitcase and then they went out together, as Dick was going to see him off. She expected Dick back later, and when he never turned up she was a little anxious. However, she comforted herself with the thought that he was making a night of it. It wasn't the first time that that had happened. She was quite sure that Dick had taken nothing out of the house with him. And she was equally certain that he hadn't left the lighter that Harry had given him lying about his room, for she had tidied that up after he had gone out.

She had seen nothing of either of the boys until the following evening. A messenger from the office had brought a telegram for Dick on Thursday morning, but she hadn't sent it on because she didn't know where to catch him. When he came back about supper-time she gave it to him. He seemed more dazed than anything else. He said he wouldn't do anything about it until he had talked it over with Harry. And then, after he'd seen Harry a couple of hours later, he said that it was too late to go down to Middleden that night. She was quite certain that neither Harry nor Dick had a pair of Uskide-soled shoes. She knew exactly what the inspector meant, for her husband had a pair, but they had been stolen.

"How did that happen, Mrs. Acott?" Arnold asked.

"It was like this, Inspector," she replied. "We have a charwoman who comes round every morning and, among other things, she cleans all the shoes before breakfast. She always cleans them in the pantry just inside the back door. One morning about ten days ago she got all the shoes laid out in a row, when she was called away for something, leaving the back door open. And when she got back my husband's shoes had gone. I expect the thief took them because they were the newest."

"Can you tell me what size and colour they were?"

"They were brown, but I can't tell you what size they were. I know my husband said they were too big for him, and he always takes sevens. I told him he'd better see if they'd fit either of the boys, but he said he could get on with them all right if he wore an extra pair of socks."

Arnold asked Mrs. Acott a few more questions and then left the house. His next call was at the offices of Messrs. Perry & Hardwell of Spitalfields. He was shown into Mr. Hardwell's room, where he explained that he was making inquiries about one of his employees, Richard Polesworth.

Mr. Hardwell raised his eyebrows at this. "Indeed?" he said. "And what has our young Dick been up to now?"

"I don't know that he's been up to anything in particular," Arnold replied guardedly. "As I dare say you know, he lost his father rather suddenly last week."

"So I am given to understand. I should have thought it was a dodge of young Dick's to go skylarking if Harry Acott hadn't told me about it. Acott's a very steady fellow, quite different from Polesworth."

"You have not a very high opinion of Polesworth, I gather?"

"I'm afraid I haven't. His heart never seems to be in his work. He always seems to be longing for five o'clock, when he can get out and enjoy himself. You can never depend upon him doing any job properly. For instance, only last week I told him to be at Harwich at ten o'clock on Thursday morning. I happened to hear from our agent there that he didn't turn up until after eleven."

"I was going to ask you about that, Mr. Hardwell. You have definite evidence that Polesworth was actually at Harwich on Thursday morning?"

"Oh, yes, there's no doubt about that. I have a letter from our agent outlining the conversation he had with him. As it happened, the ship he was to meet was delayed, so it didn't very much matter. But when I tell any one to be at a certain place at a certain time, I don't want them to turn up over an hour late. I shouldn't have sent Polesworth on the job, only,

as it happened, there was nobody else I could spare "

" Acott was at Hull on the same day, wasn't he ? " Arnold asked

" Yes, and there you see the difference between them I had told Acott to go up overnight, so that he would be sure to be on the spot by six o'clock in the morning There was a ship expected in the Albert Dock at that time, and I wanted Acott to be there when she came in Acott, instead of being behind his time, was in front of it The agent reports that he reached his office at half-past five, and that they went down to the dock together "

" Acott and Polesworth are pretty fast friends, aren't they ? " Arnold asked.

" Yes, they hunt in couples pretty much, I believe They're away together now And a confounded nuisance it is I can't say that we miss Polesworth much, but Acott is a valuable man He's got more brains than a dozen Polesworths put together."

" Yes, that's the impression I got," said Arnold " I wonder if I might have a look round Polesworth's room here ? "

" He hasn't got a room to himself," Mr Hardwell replied. " He and three others work in what we call the clerks' room You are welcome to see that, if you like "

He rang a bell and, after an interval, a sleek haired young man with spectacles appeared

" This is Mr. Sturgess, one of our clerks, Inspector," Mr Hardwell said " Mr Sturgess, will you be good enough to take the Inspector into your room and tell him anything he wants to know ? "

Arnold followed Sturgess into a large room with four desks set round it and a table in the centre Sturgess sat down at one of the desks and motioned Arnold to a vacant chair

" I'm single-handed here to-day," he said " Acott and Polesworth are away and the fourth chap has had to go to Bristol."

" I see," said Arnold. " Which is Mr. Polesworth's desk ? "

" The one to your right," Sturgess replied " And the one next to it is Acott's. Neither of them is locked, if you want to look inside."

Arnold opened Polesworth's desk and went over its contents rapidly. He found nothing but papers relating to the business of the firm, but, as he turned these over, he came upon a carpenter's pencil with a very soft lead. This he showed to Sturgess.

" Have you ever seen Mr. Polesworth using this ? " he asked

" Can't say that I have," Sturgess replied " In fact, I didn't know that there was a pencil like that in the office."

"Does it often happen that one of you four is left alone in this room?"

"Oh, yes, often enough. Not many days pass but one or other of us happen to go away on some job or other. And those of us that are left are usually dashing about the building somewhere."

"Does Polesworth get on fairly well with the rest of you?"

"He'd get on a lot better if he pulled his weight a little more. He's much too fond of trying to shuffle his work on to other people's shoulders. Harry Acott doesn't seem to mind, but I get a bit fed-up with him now and then. The fact of the matter is that he's never taken to the job."

"Doesn't put his heart into it, I suppose?" Arnold suggested.

"That's just it. It's not at all an uninteresting job when you get to understand it properly. And in a firm like this there's plenty of opportunity of getting on, as long as you're decently keen. But that sort of thing has never seemed to appeal to our Dick. He was always talking about the money he would come into when his father died, and how we shouldn't see him for dust when that happened. If it hadn't been for Harry Acott telling him not to be such a young fool, I believe he would have cleared out long before this."

"Acott has some influence over him, then?" Arnold asked.

"He can make him do pretty much what he likes, up to a point. The only thing he doesn't seem able to do is to make Dick Polesworth take an interest in his work. Dick never does anything without asking Acott what he thinks of it first. And it's lucky for him he does, for if he's left to himself he does the silliest things imaginable. I know for a fact if it hadn't been for Acott covering up his tracks, Polesworth would have got the sack long ago. I suppose now that his father's dead, he will fade out of the office, and I for one shan't weep particularly bitter tears. That is, if his father really has left him any money."

"Quite a considerable sum," said Arnold. "Enough to give him a very good income if he doesn't play ducks and drakes with it."

"Well, it's to be hoped that Harry Acott will persuade him not to make a fool of himself, though I rather doubt it. Is there anything else you particularly want to see, Inspector?"

"Not at the moment, thanks. Who uses that typewriter on the centre table?"

"Oh, it's there for any of us to use if we don't want to send for a typist. It often happens that one of us has two or three lines to write, and it's quicker for him to do it himself. As a matter

of fact, I was just going to use it when the chief sent for me."

"Do you mind if I use it for a minute first?"

"Not a bit. You'll find some plain paper in the drawer."

Arnold took a sheet of paper and rather laboriously typed a few words upon it. The message included the words on the scrap of paper found in Mr. Vernon Polesworth's pocket.

"I'm very much obliged to you, Mr. Sturgess," Arnold said as he folded up the paper and put it in his note-book. "I needn't interrupt your work any longer."

"Oh, that's all right," Sturgess replied. "When are we likely to see Dick and Harry again?"

"I expect Mr. Acott will come back fairly soon. As for Mr. Polesworth, I really can't say." And with that Arnold left the office.

He went straight to Scotland Yard, where he handed over to the experts the torn fragments of the letter, the message which he had himself typed and the carpenter's pencil. This done, he made his way to the hotel which had been described to him.

It was a secretive-looking house with heavily-curtained windows in a back street near King's Cross. He rang the bell, and after a minute or two the door was opened by a blowsy-looking woman, who looked at him searchingly. "If you want to engage a room, it's ten shillings a night, paid in advance," she said.

"No, I don't want a room," Arnold replied tartly. "Are you the manageress of this place?"

"I don't know that it's any business of yours. But, if you want to know, my husband and I own the house."

"It is my business," said Arnold. "You'll know why when you read what's written on that card."

As she glanced at the card which Arnold presented to her, her demeanour changed. "Oh, I beg your pardon, Inspector," she exclaimed. "Do please come in. You must forgive me ~~if I~~ was rude just now. But, you see, we have to be very particular about the people we let out rooms to."

"No doubt," replied Arnold dryly. "I want to see your visitors' book, please."

She pointed to the hall-table. "There you are," she said. "We're always very particular to see that our visitors register there as soon as they enter the house."

Arnold opened the book and turned to the entries for the preceding Wednesday. Dick appeared to have been the first arrival that day, for his name headed the page. It was there in a surprisingly neat handwriting. Mr. Richard Polesworth, giving as his address, London.

Glancing down the page, Arnold noticed that the remaining

entries were all in pairs. For instance, the two entering afterwards were Mr. and Mrs. Coucher, whose address was somewhat vaguely given as China, and Mr. and Mrs. Lovebird, who apparently hailed from Timbuctoo.

Arnold glanced sternly at the woman. "It seems to me that this precious establishment of yours is sailing pretty near the wind," he said. "However, we won't talk about that now. Do you remember this Mr. Richard Polesworth who came here on Wednesday evening?"

"I can't say that I do, particularly, Inspector," she replied. "You see, we get so many visitors——"

Arnold cut her short. "You'll oblige me by setting your memory to work. He came somewhere about eight o'clock with another gentleman, who left him here."

She eyed the inspector warily. "I think I remember now," she said. "The other gentleman brought him here. What did you say was the name of the gentleman who took the room?"

"Polesworth," Arnold replied. "Now, then, out with it. I want the whole story."

"I remember all about it now. Mr. Polesworth wasn't feeling at all well. In fact, the other gentleman had to pay for his room and sign the book for him. And when he'd done that he had to help him upstairs, too."

"What was the matter with Mr. Polesworth?"

"Well, Inspector, it seemed to me that he'd had rather more to drink than was good for him. The other gentleman put him on the bed and then went away, telling me that he had a train to catch. And as soon as Mr. Polesworth lay down on the bed he went to sleep."

"You didn't stay with him, I suppose?"

"There didn't seem to be any need to, for he seemed all right. Besides, I had to look out for any other visitors that might come."

"I see. Now, then, tell me: When did Mr. Polesworth leave the house? I want the truth, mind."

The woman shook her head. "I'm sorry, Inspector, but I couldn't possibly tell you that," she replied.

"What do you mean, you couldn't tell me?" Arnold demanded.

"Because I don't know. You see, it's like this: We always insist upon our visitors paying for their rooms when they come. And then, you see, they can go away when they like without any fuss."

"That's very considerate of you," said Arnold sarcastically.

"You don't speed the parting guest, then?"

"There's no need to. Either my husband or I are always

in our sitting-room at the back. The front doorbell rings in there, and one of us can open the door and let visitors in. As they pay for their rooms in advance, it is no business of ours when they care to go out again."

"And you mean to tell me that you've no idea when Mr Polesworth left the house?" Arnold insisted.

"It must have been before nine o'clock on Thursday morning—that's all I can tell you. My husband went up to his room about then to see if he was all right, and he wasn't there."

"Hadn't his bed been slept in?"

"He had lain on it, I know, for I saw the other gentleman put him there. But I think he must have stayed like that until he went away, for it didn't look as if he'd ever been between the sheets. I'd willingly tell you anything I could about it, Inspector, but that's all I know. Both gentlemen were complete strangers to me. I'd never set eyes on them before. And I haven't seen them since, for that matter."

Arnold left the hotel and went back to Scotland Yard, where he spent some little time before catching the late train to Buckley.

Meanwhile, Merrion had not been idle. Soon after Arnold had started in the village car for Buckley, he strolled as far as The Spinney, exchanged a few words with the policeman on duty, then went to the front door and rang the bell. Mrs Repton answered it and Merrion, after inquiring for Master Dick, drew her aside.

"I say, Mrs. Repton, you couldn't possibly lend me a couple of potato sacks, could you?" he asked.

"Why, the policeman who was here yesterday asked me just the same question," she replied. "I told him that he'd find two or three in the toolshed. It's not locked, you've only got to go in and take them."

"That's very good of you, Mrs. Repton," Merrion replied. "But, you know, I hardly like to do that. Would you very much mind coming with me and showing me where they are?"

Mrs. Repton smiled. "I don't mind obliging you that far," she replied. They walked to the shed together, and Merrion politely opened the door for her. "There you are," said Mrs. Repton, pointing to the mud-smeared sack which Merrion had used the day before.

"Yes, there's one," Merrion replied. "But I don't see any more. You said there were two or three, didn't you, Mrs. Repton?"

"Yes, and so there should be. I brought a couple along here myself on Saturday morning. I found two empty potato

sacks in the scullery while I was clearing up, so I put them in here out of the way. They must be about somewhere, surely.

'Do you remember exactly where you put them, Mrs. Repton?'

'Why, I just folded them in half and laid them on the end of the bench. I can't make it out at all. Someone must have come along and taken them.'

'That seems rather curious,' Merrion remarked. 'The house wasn't empty at any time on Saturday afternoon, was it?'

'Not that I know of,' Mrs. Repton replied. 'It's true that I went down to the village after tea. But the two young gentlemen were both in then. They were in the sitting-room going through Mr. Polesworth's papers. I wasn't gone more than an hour or so, and they were still there when I came back.'

'Oh, well, it doesn't matter, Mrs. Repton. I dare say I can get a couple of sacks somewhere else. I'll ask Mr. Cadby if he can do anything about it.'

Merrion left Mrs. Repton still puzzling over the mystery of the vanished sacks. But on reaching the road he did not turn towards the Red Lion. He set off at a smart pace in the opposite direction, glancing at his watch as he did so.

He followed the road until he reached the bridle path leading over the fields. He turned into this, until after a couple of miles or so he reached a main road leading into Buckley. Without slackening his pace he went on until he came to the railway station. Then once more he looked at his watch. It had taken him sixty-four minutes to cover the distance from The Spinney.

He went into the station for a few minutes then started to walk back again at an even more rapid pace than before. Although an energetic walker, he found the pace rather trying. However, he kept it up and reached The Spinney in exactly an hour.

He slackened his pace and, just before he reached the Red Lion, met Green, who jumped off his bicycle on seeing him.

'Good-afternoon, Green,' he said. 'I'm glad I've met you. The Inspector asked me to tell you that he's gone up to London, but expects to be back some time this evening. He saw Ransome this morning before he went.'

'So I understand, sir,' Green replied. 'I ought to have remembered that Saturday night was darts night at the Walnut Tree. And Arthur Ransome never misses a darts match. He's one of the best throwers in the village.'

'Well, he didn't miss this one, by all accounts. Now

look here, Green : entirely between ourselves, do you think that it's in the least likely that Ransome got one of his pals to slog young Polesworth on the head ?"

Green pondered for a little. "I don't think so, sir," he replied at last. "He's not that sort of chap."

"That's just the impression I got of him. All the same, it's just possible that he did."

"Well, I suppose it is, sir," Green agreed reluctantly. "But there's another thing. All the young chaps that Arthur Ransome goes round with were playing darts with him at the Walnut Tree. I know that, for I started making inquiries myself before I knew the Inspector had been there."

"Meaning that every one whom Ransome would be likely to appoint as his deputy was otherwise engaged ? Well, then, who can it have been ?"

Green shook his head. "I don't know, sir," he replied. "It fair beats me. I dare say you know how it is in a little place like this. I know pretty well who's likely to do a thing like that and who isn't. And I can account for all the likely ones around about nine o'clock on Saturday evening."

"All the same, it can't have been a stranger. He wouldn't have known his way through the gap in the hedge to the greenhouse. There's more in this than meets the eye, Green. You take my word for it."

Merrion had only walked a few paces after leaving Green when a car passed him. He recognised Mr. Wenlock as the driver, with Miss Bowring sitting beside him. The car stopped at the school, where Miss Bowring got out, and then drove on. He hesitated for a moment, then turned round and walked slowly back towards the school.

Miss Bowring herself opened the door to his knock.

"Hallo, Mr. Merrion !" she exclaimed. "You're getting quite a frequent visitor, aren't you ? What can I do for you this time ?"

"Take in the footsore and weary and give him a cup of tea," Merrion replied simply. "Mrs. Cadby's tea has too much horse-power for my delicate constitution."

Miss Bowring smiled at this. "Come in and I'll see what I can do about it," she said. "I've just come back from Buckley, and I was going to make a cup of tea for myself. I only hope the vicar won't come in and find us tête à tête. It would put ideas into his head, and he's got quite enough of them already."

"He's got something else to think about just now, I fancy," Merrion replied. "No I'm not going to repeat the local gossip. You'll hear about it soon enough, I haven't a doubt. You've been to see the district secretary, I suppose ?"

"I have. Mr. Wenlock was kind enough to drive me back in his car. He wanted to know what the district secretary had said about this ridiculous affair."

"So do I," said Merriion. "That is, if it isn't too painful."

"It isn't at all painful. He was very nice to me. He said that he was perfectly certain there was nothing in the allegation. Especially as Joe Masters had been arrested in the very act of stealing the coal. And he told me that if I felt affronted, he would arrange for my transfer to some other school."

"Did you accept his offer?" Merriion asked.

"No, I didn't. Of course, if Mr. Polesworth was still alive one of us would have had to go. I couldn't possibly have stayed on here with him as correspondent. But, as things are, I can afford to let bygones be bygones. I'm quite happy here, and I don't want to move to a strange place if I can help it."

"I think you're quite right," said Merriion. "By the way, do many strangers come to the school?"

"It depends what you mean by strangers. Various officials come round at intervals to inspect, but nobody else sets foot inside the school."

"Are you quite sure of that?" Merriion persisted.

"Perfectly certain, for it's one of my duties to keep them out." She fetched the book of instructions which regulated at least our official conduct. "Paragraph 109," she continued. "'Any person other than a teacher, child, manager or any other authorised person being in or on the building, playground or other premises of any public elementary school, who after being requested to depart therefrom by the head teacher of such school, refuses to depart therefrom and makes use of any violent, abusive, profane, indecent or obscene language, or otherwise behaves in a disorderly manner, shall be guilty of an offence, and shall be liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding £5.' So there you are."

"Now, that's very interesting!" Merriion exclaimed.

"It implies that a school manager may make use of any violent, abusive, profane, indecent or obscene language without being guilty of an offence. I told you that I was a school manager myself, didn't I?"

Miss Bowring laughed. "I don't think the committee meant it to imply that exactly," she replied. "The point is that I don't allow unauthorised people on the premises."

"I'm sure you don't. But you wouldn't object to some authorised person bringing a visitor in, would you? For instance, if Mr. Polesworth had brought his son with him one day when he visited the school?"

"No, I couldn't very well object to that. And, now, you mention it, young Dick Polesworth has been on the premises once or twice. And the vicar has brought his wife with him several times. But, then, I don't count either of them as strangers in the sense you were talking about."

Merrion stayed chatting with Miss Bowring for another half-hour or so. Then he went back to the Red Lion, where he had supper alone. It was not until half-past nine that the door of the sitting-room was flung open and Arnold appeared.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I've asked Cadby to fill the largest jug he's got with beer and bring it up here," said the inspector. "I can do with it after the strenuous day I've had."

"That beer idea is the best you've had for a long time," Merrion replied. "How did you get on?"

Arnold's reply was interrupted by the entry of Mr. Cadby bearing a ewer full of beer and two glasses.

"How will that suit you, gentlemen?" he asked.

"Down to the ground," Arnold replied. "Put the jug down on the table, and if we want more we'll shout for it."

As Mr. Cadby retired Arnold poured himself out a glass of beer and took a long pull at it.

"Ah, that's better!" he exclaimed. "Now just you sit down and listen to what I've got to say, without interrupting."

Merrion listened obediently to the inspector's full and detailed account of his day's adventures.

"All that's deeply interesting," he said, "In fact, what you tell me is very much what I had expected. Dick Polesworth cannot establish an alibi for several hours after eight o'clock on Wednesday evening."

"That's quite right," Arnold replied meaningly. "He isn't heard of again until he met his firm's agent at Harwich at half-past eleven next morning."

"I rather thought that would turn out to be the case," said Merrion in a satisfied tone. "You're not so incredulous now about my theory?"

"That's right, rub it in! After all, you can't claim much credit for it. You must admit that it was entirely guesswork."

"I'm the first to admit that. You're quite satisfied now that young Dick murdered his father?"

"It's perfectly obvious. He slipped out of that brothel

as soon as Acott's back was turned and caught a train for here. The very train I've just come by, in all probability. I took a taxi out here, but he wouldn't have dared to do that. So he had to walk."

"Yes, I sympathise with him there," said Merrion feelingly. "He slipped out of the brothel, as you call it. Did he go back there?"

"No, he wouldn't have done that. People can slip out without being noticed, but they can't get in without ringing the bell for the door to be opened to them. And his bed hadn't been slept in, only laid on."

"Then why didn't he catch the train at Liverpool Street that he originally intended to? You see the point, don't you? If he got back to London by the last train from Buckley, he would have been there by a quarter to one in the morning. If he couldn't go back to the hotel the only thing for him to do was to wander aimlessly about. He could just as easily have caught the 6.55 from Liverpool Street as the 8.28."

"You've got that late train from Buckley on the brain," Arnold replied. "How do you know he went back to London by that? He may have hung around here until the first train from Buckley in the morning. And that doesn't get in until after seven, too late to catch the 6.55 from Liverpool Street."

"That's a fair answer to my objection," Merrion replied. "All right, carry on."

"We'll get back to the preliminary arrangements he made," said Arnold. "The shoes first. He wanted a pair that would make no noise, and yet would not leave prints that could be traced to him. So he pinched a pair belonging to Acott senior when the charwoman wasn't looking."

"Yes, but what did he do with them? He wasn't carrying them about while he was with Acott on Wednesday evening, I suppose?"

"No, he hadn't them with him then. But I fancy he knew where to find them. My idea is that he sneaked down here one evening with the shoes and hid them in some convenient place. The toolshed, for example."

"Ah, yes, the toolshed, which is never locked," said Merrion. "I've got something to tell you about that presently. That disposes of the difficulty of the shoes. What next?"

"I'll tell you. In the room where Dick works at Perry & Hardwell's there is a typewriter. It is for the use of any of the four clerks who use the room. It frequently happens that one or other of the clerks is left alone in that room. I typed a few words with that machine on the blank paper

supplied in the office. I was careful to choose words which appeared on the scrap of paper found in Polesworth senior's pocket. I gave these two specimens to the experts at the Yard. They report that not only were both typed on the same machine, but the paper is the same in both cases."

Merrion nodded. "That's very much what I expected," he said. "The inference being, of course, that Dick typed what we have called the anonymous letter."

"And that's not all," Arnold continued. "In Dick's desk at the office I found a carpenter's pencil. I handed this over to the experts, who reported that in all probability it was the pencil used to scribble the telephone number on the back of the scrap of paper."

"Better and better," said Merrion encouragingly. "I see you're completely converted to my theory. And the weapon?"

"There's no proved connection between that piece of piping and the death of Polesworth senior," Arnold replied cautiously. "By which I mean that there is nothing whatever to show that it was the weapon used in his case. On the other hand, it may have been, and if it was it presents no difficulty. Either Dick brought it down with him on Wednesday evening, hidden down the leg of his trousers as you suggested yourself, or he had hidden it previously in the same place as he had hidden the shoes."

"Good enough," Merrion remarked. "Now we come to the actual procedure."

"You've got your own theory about that," Arnold replied. "I agree with you that Dick caught the 8.28 from London and walked here from Buckley. And that precious cigarette lighter found on the plot of grass suggests that he waited there for his father to come out of the house. But as to what exactly happened after that I'm not so sure. Somehow, I don't fancy that your coke-dust arguments would convince a jury."

"They would convince any reasonable person," said Merrion. "But, then, juries are unaccountable, I'll admit. They're like chemical combinations. Two gases will combine to form a liquid. In the same way twelve reasonable individuals will combine to form an entirely irresponsible jury."

"Well, anyhow, I shan't insist upon the point," said Arnold. "Polesworth senior was knocked on the head, whether in the furnace-room or in the cellar is not a matter of any very great importance. Dick may or may not have thought that he had killed him outright. In any case, he turned on the gas to make quite sure his father was dead."

"And subsequently?" Merrion asked.

"He cleared out. He took off the Uskide-soled shoes and put on the pair he had come down in. The Uskide pair was picked up by Joe Masters next morning. But Dick didn't hurry back to Buckley to catch the train to London. Why should he? He had done his job, and time didn't matter now. He may have realised that he couldn't catch the train to Harwich that he was supposed to. But I don't suppose that worried him. In any case, he had a reputation for slackness, and he might as well keep it up. Besides, now that his father was dead, he wasn't worrying any longer about his position with Perry & Hardwell's. He had boasted openly that as soon as he came into his money he would throw up his job and enjoy himself."

"You agree, I suppose, that he chucked away the weapon when the end of the bridle path was reached?"

"Yes, I suppose so, if that bit of piping was the weapon." Merrion finished his glass of beer and poured himself out a fresh one. "You seem to have done pretty well on the whole," he said. "Do you consider that you have a sufficient case against Dick to justify his arrest?"

"I think I have. But, of course, I shan't do anything without consulting the local police. I shall make it my business to see the superintendent in Buckley first thing in the morning. What's your opinion?"

"About the arrest? Oh, I think you've ample evidence. But there are just one or two details that I think you ought to clear up first. For instance, you don't attach any importance to the assaults on young Acott and Dick."

"None whatever. They have nothing on earth to do with the murder of Polesworth senior."

"That's just where you are wrong," Merrion replied slowly. "Those two assaults are the most significant clues you've got."

Arnold stared at him in puzzled amazement. "What on earth are you talking about?" he demanded. "You said yourself that those assaults were made by one of the locals who had a grievance against Dick and took advantage of his presence here to attack him."

"I know I did," Merrion replied. "But I was wrong. I'm convinced now that those assaults were made by the person who murdered Polesworth senior."

"By young Dick, you mean!" Arnold exclaimed. "Have you gone clean off your head? You must see for yourself that that's sheer nonsense."

"Nonsense it may be," said Merrion quietly. "But just listen to me for a moment. Mrs. Repton told me that she

is convinced that there were at least two potato sacks in the toolshed on Saturday morning. On Sunday morning you, Green and I were unable to find more than one. Do you consider it credible that any trespasser would have stolen a sack from the toolshed in the interval? Remember that all the time the house was being guarded by your stout fellows. Potato sacks are among the common objects of the countryside. If anybody had wanted to pinch one, he could have found a sack in some other place that was not under the very eyes of the police. No, don't interrupt. You'll see what I'm getting at very soon.

"I believe that on Saturday morning there were actually three sacks in the shed. Somebody wanted two of them to wrap round his boots in order to make his footprints untraceable. You remember the demonstration I gave you? He didn't reach the toolshed by crossing the garden from the gap in the hedge, for if he had he would have left the marks of his boots on the soft ground. He must then have walked openly down the path from the house."

Arnold displayed signs of impatience, but Merriion silenced him with a gesture.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Just consider those two tracks across the garden between the greenhouse and the gap in the hedge. You can't tell which was made first, because they do not overlap at any point. The set leading towards the greenhouse may have been made before the other set, or *vice versa*. In other words, the person who made them may simply have walked to the gap and back again."

Arnold could restrain himself no longer. "But why, in heaven's name?" he exclaimed.

"For the very purpose of suggesting that the assailant came from outside. But suppose he didn't? Suppose he came from the house? In that case he went to the toolshed, took two of the sacks, bound them to his feet, made the tracks going to the gap and back again. Finally he took off the sacks and burnt them in the greenhouse furnace. Now what about it?"

Arnold shook his head. "I wouldn't check the flow of your imagination for worlds," he replied.

"All right, then. I think those tracks were made on Saturday afternoon just as it was getting dark. At that time Mrs. Repton says that she was somewhere down the village and that the two young fellows were alone in the house. Now let's turn to something quite different."

"It might be just as well," remarked Arnold sarcastically.

"You'll find that it will be at least as instructive. This afternoon I amused myself by walking to Buckley station

and back I found that walking as nearly as I could judge at four miles an hour it took me sixty four minutes. On the way back I increased my pace and I pride myself that I'm a pretty good walker when the fit takes me. I managed to cover the distance in exactly an hour, but it was just as much as I could do. And we can't allow Polesworth's murderer much more than an hour from the time that the train from London reached Buckley station at 9.10.

'Well, Dick must have put his best foot forward, that's all.

"He must indeed. Don't you remember hearing that Dick never walked a step farther than he could help? Do you seriously believe that a man unused to walking could have made as good time as I did? I certainly don't. Acott, on the other hand is by his own confession a most enthusiastic walker. I expect he could have done it in an hour, if he put himself to it."

"Acott!" Arnold exclaimed. "What the dickens has he got to do with it?"

"That's for you to judge when you've heard all I've got to say. Now let's consider the assault upon that unfortunate young man. Green has never been able to trace the owner of the bicycle with the powerful lamp has he?"

"Not that I know of," Arnold replied.

"And that's pretty queer in a little place like this where everybody knows everybody else's business. Of course, it might have been Joe Masters, but for the unfortunate fact that Joe was regaling himself in the bar of the Bunch of Grapes fourteen miles away at the time. Failing Joe, there seems no other likely candidate. And that doesn't seem to me extraordinary, for I don't believe the man on the bicycle ever existed.

"Well, somebody certainly swiped Acott across the face. You've seen the mark for yourself."

Merrion chuckled. "Have you never heard of a self-inflicted wound?" he asked. "Now, just think for a moment. How would a right handed man who wanted to produce a convincing weal across his face, and was provided with a suitable weapon, set about the business? He would hold the weapon in his right hand and bring it up smartly against the left side of his head. The weal would then run diagonally across the cheek, exactly as it does in Acott's case."

"But why in the world should Acott want to give himself a clout like that?" Arnold demanded.

"Because he wanted to give the impression that one of the Middleden folk was after Dick's blood. He borrowed Dick's cap and raincoat to go for his walk in, you must remember. And he succeeded. We all supposed that he had been mis-

taken for Dick. And we jumped to the not unnatural conclusion that Dick's assailant was the person who had been responsible for his father's death.

"But Acott is one of those persistent people who always want to improve the situation. Not content with a single assault, he set to work to stage another, on Dick himself this time. Of course it was Acott who made those tracks across the garden, and put the coke-shovel where he could lay his hands on it quickly in the dark."

"But Acott was standing at the front door when Dick was knocked on the head," Arnold objected.

"Was he? We've only got his own word for that. Oh, yes, I know what you're going to say. Tripp's evidence confirms his statement. But that confirmation is apparent and not real. You remember my calculations? It took Tripp fifty-five seconds to reach the front gate. And an amazing lot can happen in that time. What did actually happen was that Acott ran down to the greenhouse in those indoor shoes of his that would make no noise, clouted Dick on the head with the coke-shovel and then ran back again. He was standing in the porch several seconds before Tripp appeared on the scene."

"You're not suggesting that he wanted to kill Dick, are you?" Arnold asked.

"Not for a moment," Merrion replied promptly. "Dick's death at this juncture is the very last thing he wants. No, he had a passion for strengthening the impression he had already made. Don't you see? So implacable was Polesworth's murderer that he was intent upon visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children. And, of course, the tracks across the garden suggested that he had come in from outside."

"But why was Acott so intent upon creating the impression?"

"Obviously because he had murdered Polesworth himself," Merrion replied quietly.

"Ah, my friend, that's just where you become unstuck," exclaimed Arnold triumphantly. "You may be as doubtful of alibis as you please, but Acott's at least is absolutely watertight. Didn't you hear what I told you just now? He was told to go up to Hull overnight and get in touch with his firms' agent at six o'clock in the morning. Actually he exceeded his instructions and dug out the agent at half-past five."

"Yes, I know. And Hull is a matter of some two hundred miles from London. But, do you know, I rather anticipated an alibi of that kind. So this afternoon, while I was resting from my strenuous exercise at Buckley, I borrowed the station-master's Bradshaw and studied the train service. And greatly

to my satisfaction I found that a train left King's Cross at 1 ro a m. and got to Hull at 5.15."

"The devil you did!" Arnold exclaimed. "5.15, eh? And Acott saw the agent at half-past. But, of course, it's all nonsense. Why should Acott want to kill his friend's father, whom, after all, he hardly knew?"

"I think the motive's easily explained," Merrion replied. "You told me just now that Dick was fond of saying that he would come into money some day. I haven't a doubt that's what made Acott cultivate his friendship. You've got to consider the entirely different characters of those two young fellows. Dick is obviously weak and completely under Acott's influence. I don't think it's difficult to guess what would have happened. It wouldn't have been very long before somehow or other Dick's money found its way into Acott's pocket."

"That's very likely," Arnold admitted.

"Very well, then. Now, just consider how the theory of Acott's guilt removes the difficulties. The Uskide-soled shoes to begin with. Your explanation of how Dick smuggled them down, and hid them, in the toolshed is ingenious if not quite convincing. But, in Acott's case, the necessity for doing such a thing did not exist. He was carrying the shoes round with him on Wednesday evening."

"How do you know that?" Arnold asked.

"I don't know it. But remember what Dick told us about their setting out. He was not going to be away overnight, but Acott was. Before they set out for their evening's adventure Acott went upstairs and put a few things in a suitcase. And, of course, among other things he put in the shoes, and in all probability the weapon."

"It's perfectly obvious to me that Acott had worked out the whole affair very carefully in advance. He meant to kill Polesworth senior, so that his money would pass to Dick. But he had no intention of allowing the crime to be traced to him. So he made as many false trails as he could think of. In the first place he planned the murder so that it might appear that it was the unfortunate result of a practical joke. Then, as I've already explained, he took steps to make it appear that the murder was the act of someone living in Middleden who had a grudge against the Polesworth family. Finally, he laid a third trail, crossing the first two. He so arranged matters that suspicion would fall upon Dick."

"Pretty lowdown of him, surely," Arnold suggested.

"I don't suppose he looked at it quite in that light. He knew that nothing very serious was likely to happen to Dick, even if he did fall under suspicion. No jury would have convicted him on the evidence that could have been obtained

against him. Acott probably hoped that Dick would be arrested and acquitted, and that there the matter would end. Every one would feel convinced that Dick had murdered his father, but nothing further could be done about it.

'That's all very well,' said Arnold. 'But how did Acott obtain the necessary local knowledge?'

Merrion smiled. "In all probability he had never been on the school premises before. I ascertained that from Miss Bowring this afternoon. But when he was staying here with Dick at Christmas time Polesworth senior was full of his suspicions about the coal being stolen. I haven't a doubt that he talked about it at length. He explained where the cellar key was kept, and how someone who had access to that must be the culprit. Acott had only to keep his ears open to learn as much as he wanted to know about the school arrangements. Another thing he used to come in here with Dick and had seen the poster advertising the whist drive and dance stuck up in the bar.

"Now, I've accounted for his motive and for his possession of the necessary knowledge. And you've already outlined the preliminary steps he took. He borrowed a pair of shoes which, although too large for his father, would fit him. He manufactured his weapon out of a piece of lead piping and an old bicycle tyre. He typed what we have called the anonymous letter on the office typewriter, and tore it in pieces. On the back of one of the pieces he scribbled Wenlock's telephone number with a carpenter's pencil which he deposited in Dick's desk."

"I still don't quite see the point of the anonymous letter," Arnold remarked.

"Oh, yes, you do. You saw it as soon as you found the scrap of paper. It was meant to suggest that Polesworth had been lured to the cellar and locked in. Evidence in support of the practical joker theory, in fact. Besides it by any chance it was discovered that the letter had been typed in the office, the suspicion would have fallen upon Dick. And it worked all right, you must admit."

Arnold grunted. "What about the telephone number scribbled on the back?" he asked.

"More local colour. I don't suppose that Acott knew much about Wenlock, but he had heard him spoken of no doubt. That telephone number drew our attention to Wenlock and incidentally sent us off on a false trail. And no doubt that's exactly what Acott intended.

"Now we come to Acott's actions on Wednesday evening. I think we can follow them almost minute by minute. You can imagine those two young fellows setting out to enjoy themselves, Acott, remember, carrying his suitcase. The first

step was to get young Dick thoroughly drunk, so drunk that he could be safely disposed of for the rest of the night. There wasn't any very great difficulty about that for Dick takes to drink like a duck to water. But I don't suppose that Acott relied upon that entirely. I expect that when he had got Dick into a condition of not taking too much notice, he slipped a little something into his last two or three drinks. You know as well as I do that there are several tricks by which one can bowl over the most experienced toper."

"You believe Dick's story that he remembers nothing until he woke up next morning?" Arnold asked.

"I do. And I also believe that Acott knew perfectly well where he meant to park him. He didn't have to look round for a suitable place, for he had one in mind already."

"Why did he write Dick's proper name in the book. The other visitors to that particular establishment don't observe that formality."

"Because he wanted to facilitate any inquiries which might be made into Dick's movements that night. He was quite ready for it to be known that Dick entered the hotel. But he didn't want anybody to know when he might have left it. Hence his choice of so disreputable a parking place."

"However, we'll leave Dick carefully deposited on his bed and follow Acott. From this time he had hardly a moment to waste. He rushed off to catch his train. But this was not the 8.25 to Hull, but the 8.28 to Buckley. He reached Buckley by 9.10 and set off across the fields for Middleden."

"Now you've got to put yourself in Acott's place. He knew that Polesworth senior went out to stoke up his fire every evening. But he couldn't tell within half an hour or so what time he would go out that particular evening. It might be as early as ten o'clock or as late as half-past. Anyway, if his plan were to succeed, he must be at The Spinney as soon as possible after ten o'clock."

"As I have already told you, it takes a pretty stout walker to cover the distance in an hour. I refuse to believe that Dick is capable of doing it. But, as we know, walking is Acott's hobby."

"He contrived to reach The Spinney before Polesworth left the house, and took up his position on that patch of grass with the trees growing on it. I've already explained why he chose that particular spot. Oh, yes, and there's one thing I forgot to mention. When he deposited Dick in the hotel, he possessed himself of the cigarette lighter. He ran no risk in doing that, for Dick would never suspect him of such a thing. Dick is quite well aware of his habit of leaving things about. When he missed the lighter he would suppose that he had mislaid it somewhere, as in fact he did. It was part of his scheme,

for throwing suspicion upon Dick, and Acott dropped the lighter on the grass

‘He then changed his shoes and took the weapon out of his suitcase, which he left, I expect, under one of the apple trees. He saw Polesworth come out of the house and followed him down to the furnace pit. He hit him on the back of his head with his weapon, sufficiently hard to make him unconscious. As Polesworth dropped to the ground his hat fell off and his spectacle case tumbled out of his pocket. Acott saw the hat and put it back on his victim’s head. But he failed to notice the spectacle-case. He took the bunch of keys from Polesworth’s pocket, then carried him across to the school. His method of securing the cellar key I have already explained. He deposited his victim in the cellar, turned on the gas and locked the door. But he couldn’t lock the iron gate because Polesworth’s keys had to be found in his pocket.

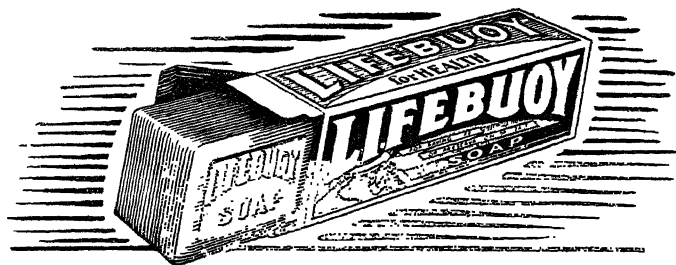
“Acott then went back to the apple tree and changed his shoes once more. Then, having recovered his suitcase, he set off again for Buckley station. He had no further use for the Uskide soled shoes, so he dropped them by the roadside for the first passer-by to pick them up. Even then, I fancy, he had an idea that the weapon might come in useful again. But obviously he didn’t want to risk carrying it about with him. So he hid it somewhere not far from the beginning of the bridle path across the field.

“Again he had to step out, for it was absolutely essential that he should catch the 11.35 at Buckley. He did so, and reached London at 12.45. That gave him twenty-five minutes to get to King’s Cross before the 1.10 train started for Hull. He caught it, reached Hull at 5.15 and immediately set out to find his firm’s agent.

“From that moment everything went according to plan. He did his business in Hull and got back to London that evening. He went straight home, where he found Dick, who told him the news contained in the telegram. He knew then that his scheme had succeeded.

“I’m pretty sure that he meant to find some pretext for coming down here and keeping an eye on the proceedings. As it happened, Dick saved him the trouble. He rang him up at the office on Friday morning and asked him to join him. Mr. Hardwell, who knew how helpless Dick was when left to himself, immediately gave him leave to do so. He turned up at The Spinney to find that the case was already in the hands of the Yard. And that, I fancy, must have rattled him pretty badly. He felt that it was up to him to strengthen the impression he had already created.

“Of course, he would have done much better to have left well alone. But, as I said before, he’s of the type that always



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seeks to gild the lily. And he wasted no time about it. That very evening he went out for a walk and came back with the story that he had been attacked by a man on a bicycle. It isn't difficult to guess what actually happened. He remembered where he had hidden the weapon, and found it again. Then he clouted himself on the side of the head with it and threw it away into the ditch. It didn't much matter to him whether any one found it or not, for there would be no fingerprints on it by which it could be identified.

"Of course, his motive is obvious enough now. He wanted to strengthen the impression that a sort of minor reign of terror existed in Middledon. Dressed as he was in Dick's clothes, he knew that every one would jump to the conclusion that he had been mistaken for him. The inference was that some local criminal existed who, not content with locking the father into the coal-cellar, had attempted to lay out the son.

"But still he was not content. On the following evening he staged a still more dramatic adventure. Don't forget that it was Acott's frugal mind that protested against the valuable orchids being allowed to die for want of care. He knew from experience what a handy place that furnace pit was for knocking any one on the head, and he fully intended that Dick should go there. He wished to convince us once more of the existence of a local assassin. But he dared not leave any tracks across the garden that might possibly be recognised. Hence the theft of the sacks from the toolshed."

Merrion drained his glass of beer, then stretched out his hand and lifted the jug. "Confound you, you've finished that beer while I've been talking!" he exclaimed. "And it's far too late now to summon the landlord to refill the flowing bowl. He'll have gone to bed. Well, what are you going to do about it?"

Arnold rose from his chair, stretched himself, and yawned cavernously. "I'm going to bed," he replied.

At a conference the next morning with the superintendent at Buckley it was eventually decided that Acott should be arrested and charged with the murder of Mr. Vernon Polesworth. As Arnold was only too well aware, the evidence against him was wholly circumstantial. But Arnold believed—and in this Merrion supported him—that the unexpected shock of arrest would produce a damaging statement.

"It's like this," said Merrion as they drove back from Buckley. "The fellow hasn't the remotest idea that we've seen through his game. If we pounce on him suddenly he won't have time to think out any line of defence. Besides, he would imagine that we should never go to the length of arresting him unless we had some very definite evidence. I'm

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convinced it's worth trying, anyhow. But I think you should make the affair as impressive as you can."

The first step was taken by Arnold, who went alone to Tim Spinney and spoke to Mrs. Repton.

Master Dick, she reported, was still in bed, but the doctor had told her that he was getting on nicely. Mr. Acott had decided that he could not very well stay away from the office any longer, and was at that moment packing his suitcase preparatory to walking to Buckley and taking a train to London.

Arnold based his arrangements upon this information.

When Acott came out of the house a few minutes later he found himself confronted by a group consisting of the superintendent, Arnold, Merriion, Green and Tripp. As he hesitated for a moment, Arnold stepped forward and the others surrounded him.

Acott's glance travelled slowly round the circle of stern faces. He hardly seemed to listen to Arnold's solemn charge and warning. Then suddenly he thrust out his clenched fist at the superintendent, who happened to be standing between him and the front gate. The superintendent staggered back and Acott made a dive for the gate. But Merriion, who had played rugger in his youth, was as quick as he was. He made a dash for his legs and brought him crashing down on the pavement. A moment later Acott, bruised and bleeding, was securely handcuffed.

As Merriion had anticipated, the shock of his arrest took all the heart out of him. As soon as he was formally charged at Buckley Police Station, he expressed his readiness to make a statement. This statement was long and rambling, but it proved conclusively that Acott had murdered Mr. Polesworth exactly as Merriion had surmised. According to Acott, his motive had been wholly altruistic. Polesworth's money was doing no good to any one, and Dick would make far better use of it. Besides, he, Acott, had discovered a marvellous opening in the wholesale grocery line which no one had ever thought of exploiting. To do so he would require capital. He proposed to take Dick into partnership, and with his brains and Dick's money, the venture could not fail to be an immediate success.

"Do you know?" said Merriion, as he and Arnold left the police station together. "From the very first I had an idea——"

"Oh, shut up!" Arnold replied. "You've had so many contradictory ideas in this business that one of them was bound to be right. You made a lucky guess in the end, and that's all there is to it."

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